MIR ZAYNEN DO!: YIDDISH MUSIC, AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY, AND THE PROMISE OF A JEWISH FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Justine Orlovsky-Schnitzler: *Mir zaynen do!*: Yiddish Music, American Jewish Identity, and the Promise of a Jewish Future
(Under the direction of Dr. Gabrielle Berlinger)

This thesis project examines the music of Yiddish-speaking Jewish partisans and ghetto resisters, as sung for a modern audience by the Boston Worker's Circle community chorus, *A Besere Velt* ('A Better World'). I draw from a combination of original interviews with current members of *A Besere Velt* across a wide age range, folklore and related interdisciplinary research, and primary Yiddish source material. I examine what makes singing these songs so poignant for contemporary Jews, giving them a life that exists beyond their original audience through continued performance. Ultimately, I argue that through repeat performance and interpretation of partisan and ghetto songs, members of *A Besere Velt* are creating a conduit between past and present time—a liminal space, ripe with possibility. I utilize the interviews I conducted with *A Besere Velt* chorus members to provide a nuanced portrait of the varying motivations and affiliations of the group, with an emphasis on each individual's relationship to Jewishness and the Yiddish language. I also provide an in-depth look at the partisan and ghetto songs most frequently performed by *A Besere* Velt. I situate the songs within the genre of Yiddish music (or Yiddish folk music) more broadly and examine how chorus members create meaning through the performance of partisan music, the construction of Jewish space, and the promise of Jewish futures.

For Dr. Joel and Ellie Freid

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In most cases, when representing the sounds of Yiddish with the English alphabet, I am doing so according to the YIVO[1] Institute's standards for Yiddish transliteration—the standards most commonly used by publishers and scholars today.[2] There are a few notable exceptions to this: when quoting interviews with Worker's Circle members, I default to their preferred colloquial spellings. This is most evident in the world *shul* (synagogue)—several interviewees, when they saw their completed transcripts, corrected the YIVO-standardized spelling to *shule*. Thus, direct quotations that include Yiddish that deviates from the YIVO standards does so with the express permission of my consultants.

[1] "YIVO" originally stood for *Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut* ("Yiddish Scientific Institute") but the acronym is now the name of the organization in its own right.

[2] https://www.yivo.org/Yiddish-Resources-at-YIVO

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PRELUDE

From Elie Wiesel's 'The Gates of the Forest'

When the great Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light the fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Years later when a disciple of the Ba'al Shem-Tov, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, another rabbi, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

The years passed. And it fell to Rabbi Israel of Ryzhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

INTRODUCTION

On the eve of World War II, there were an estimated ten to twelve million Yiddish speakers around the world; after 1945, fewer than one million remained. In addition to being the mother tongue and everyday language for a majority of Europe's Jewish population for hundreds of years, Yiddish functioned as a tool of political organizing and a statement of identity that buoyed many of the radical leftist Jewish populations that flourished prior to World War II. Most of the pockets of armed, organized Jewish resistance (partisans) to the Nazi regime were Yiddish-speaking, and thus the language itself functioned as a solidarity statement: a proud expression of Jewishness in defiance of fascism. As a brief introduction: *partisans* are members of irregular military units—that is, they do not belong to the organized military units of a nation state but are instead revolutionaries and counterforces, operating as community and group-based fighters. Most crucially, partisan groups often have a vested and personal interest in survival, beyond the tactical and imperial objectives of nation-states. Jewish partisan groups and bands of resistance fighters existed throughout Europe during World War II, though they were primarily concentrated in the forests of Eastern Europe. Jewish partisans derailed Nazi supply trains, passed messages between those trapped in ghettos and those on the outside, collaborated with Allied armed forces, and stockpiled weapons and engaged in warfare with Nazi troops and sympathizers.[3] The legacy of Jewish resistance—in partisan units, in ghetto uprisings, and in the camps themselves—against the Nazis is often dwarfed in memory by the sheer number of

[3] For more reading on Jewish partisans and their tactics and operations, see (Suhl, 1975).

atrocities the regime was able to implement. Many partisans and ghetto fighters composed songs and poems in Yiddish that survived the war and have experienced a second life in politically radical Jewish spaces within the United States, taking on new meanings in the process. As a folklorist, one of my central concerns is the way in which tradition is created and transformed (in relevance and purpose), and how meaning—especially political meaning—is contextually determined. I am interested in understanding how people perform aspects of group and individual identity across boundaries of time and place, and which aspects of identity do and do not change in the process. To that end, this thesis project examines the music of Yiddish-speaking Jewish partisans and ghetto resisters, as sung for a modern audience by the Boston Worker's Circle community chorus, *A Besere Velt* ('A Better World').

Songs and music composed by partisans and ghetto fighters were primarily passed by word of mouth and often built from existing, widely known melodies—particularly from other leftist communities (for example: *Zog nit Kenymol*, one of the most famous Jewish partisan songs, uses the melody of a Soviet Red Army marching song, used most famously in a film). To sing the music of Yiddish-speaking partisans today is to call upon a specific well of strength from a particular period in Jewish history. What makes singing these songs so poignant for contemporary Jews, giving them a life that exists beyond their original audience through continued performance? Ultimately, I argue that through repeat public performance and interpretation of partisan and ghetto songs, members of *A Besere Velt* are creating a conduit between past and present time—a liminal space that fosters a promise of a Jewish future. A deeply layered study of this chorus would include perspectives on both partisan and non-partisan repertoires, ghetto and shtetl themes, issues of gender and class, and more. Due to the concise nature of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the partisan dimension of the music as the lens

though which to understand broader implications of the intersection of politics and daily experience for Jews of a particular time and place. I believe it provides an important snapshot of how many members of *A Besere Velt* understand their Jewishness in the context of a radical Yiddish inheritance. Though this thesis is necessarily small in scope and length, complex and divergent opinions on all of the issues mentioned in this thesis do exist in fuller forms and are worthy of continued research. To this end, this is a sample of the core values and worldviews of the individuals profiled—all in service to getting as close as possible to a portrait of *A Besere Velt*.

A brief history of the Yiddish language

By the estimation of most scholars, Yiddish—the Germanic language of (primarily) Central and Eastern European Jewry—came into being sometime in the tenth century (YIVO 2014). "Throughout the thousands of years of their history," Josh Lambert and Ilan Stavans write in *How Yiddish Changed America and America Changed Yiddish*, "Jewish people have spoken many languages…Hebrew the language of the Torah, is one such language…Ladino, or Judean-Spanish, has been spoken by the descendants of the expulsion from Spain in 1492" (Stavans & Lambert 2020, xvii). Yiddish has elements of Slavic and Romance languages, which reflects the populations that early European Jews encountered and places in which they settled and established communities.

Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of the *Ashkenaz*, the ancient Yiddish term for Northern Europe) prayed in Hebrew during religious services, debated Torah and Talmud in Aramaic, and used Yiddish in their homes; Yiddish is often referred to by Ashkenazi Jews as the *mameloshen* ('mother tongue') while Hebrew is known as the *loshen-koydesh* ("holy tongue"). All three languages utilize the same alphabet, with different pronunciation, orthography, and grammatical

rules (perhaps most importantly: Yiddish represents all vowels, whereas Hebrew optionally represents vowels with marks called *niqqud* (Leopold 2008)). As a Germanic tongue, spoken Yiddish is not dissimilar to English in cadence and sentence structure. However, Yiddish and German are not mutually intelligible; Yiddish has many words, phrases, and sounds derived and borrowed from the *loshen-koydesh*, as well as other aforementioned languages of the countries European Jews inhabited. "The Yiddish language is only a thousand or so years old," Dovid Katz writes in *Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish*, "But many of its elements—words, turns of phrase, idioms, embedded historical references—are much older. They fed into Yiddish in a continuous language chain that antedated ancient Hebrew, progressed through Hebrew and then Jewish Aramaic, and ended up in today's Yiddish" (Katz 2007, 11).

"During much of its existence," Stavans and Lambert write, "Yiddish was dismissed as a *zhargon*, not quite a language at all" (Stavans & Lambert 2020, xvii). But of course, Yiddish was—and is—a full, robust language that contains, like any language, a world entire within its verbs, diphthongs, and *oys*. "Yiddish is the vehicle of a rich cultural heritage," the YIVO Center for Jewish Research asserts from the first page of its *Basic Facts About Yiddish* pamphlet. "Its idioms, proverbs, songs, and humor symbolize the patterns of Ashkenazic Jewish living and thinking" (YIVO 2014). Important, too, is the implication that a 'zhargon' is inherently less valuable or worthy of time and attention. Some of the greatest Yiddish scholars of the last century have rebuked this idea strongly. "All languages are inherently potential equal value," Katz writes. He continues:

> A master Yiddish scholar of the twentieth century, Max Weinreich, quipped that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy." There are no good and bad, beautiful and ugly, complicated and simple languages from a scientific point of view. All natural languages are of equal capacity to grow, develop, and meet the needs of the communities that speak them. They can serve the motives of the best and worst, the beautiful and ugly, the inspired and the ridiculous. (Katz 2007, 3)

In *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (2005), author Jeffrey Shandler is concerned with what Yiddish *means* rather than what it *is*. After the war, Shandler argues, speaking Yiddish, particularly among American Jews, was an exercise in nostalgia before anything else. Shandler describes a "…divergence between the reduced use of Yiddish as a vernacular…and the proliferation of other forms of engagement with the language" (Shandler 2005, 25). Though Yiddish remains the primary language of several Hasidic[4] sects in New York and in Israel, it is also "…a subject of study…an inspiration for performers and their audience…a literature increasingly accessible through translation…a selective vocabulary sprinkled through the speech of Jews and non-Jews, and an object of affection" (ibid., 2).

Shandler also writes that "…having an affective or ideological relationship with Yiddish without having command of the language epitomizes a larger trend in Yiddish culture in the post-Holocaust era" (*ibid*., 2). I underlined and circled this sentence many times when I read it; my own relationship with Yiddish, prior to college, was defined by assumption and idealization. My conception of the language had been shaped by my parents and grandparents. The words sounded funny coming out of our mouths. We imagined our ancestors speaking entirely in *oy*s and *schmooze*s; this is the disconnect fostered by two or three generations of removal from the so-called Old Country. The (Jewish) manager of the late, great Jewish comedian, Joan Rivers, famously recounted a story of Rivers and her daughter encountering Yiddish 'in the wild,' underscoring the seemingly inherent comedic nature of the language itself by the mid-20th century:

> Two old Jews came up to Joan that day when Melissa tagged along with us to the Palm Court. They said something to Joan in Yiddish. Melissa was roaming around the room like a little Jewish Eloise and Joan calls her over. Melissa traipses over and Joan told the

[4] 'Hasidic' refers to adherents of Hasidic Judaism, a movement born in the mid-nineteenth century grounded in mysticism and religious devotion. Hasidic Jews broadly fall on the orthodox side of the Jewish spectrum, and communities tend to be clustered around dynastic rabbinic lines.

> old Jew to repeat what he had just said in Yiddish and Joan and Melissa fell all over each other hysterically laughing. My eyes were falling out of my head thinking how smart this little girl is to already know Yiddish. So after the old Jews walked away and Melissa goes off to pretend she's Eloise, I turn to Joan and say, "My word, Joan. I'm so impressed. Melissa knows Yiddish?" Joan goes, "No. She doesn't know Yiddish and I don't know Yiddish. But anybody who's speaking to you in Yiddish is telling you a joke so you laugh at the end of it. I've taught her that much so nobody will think she's stupid." (Blumberg 2014)

As an undergraduate, my relationship to my Jewish ethnic and cultural background became more political. The further into leftist organizing I went, the more pride I derived from the well-trodden road between Jewish identity and radical political action. Central to this was Yiddish—I understood Hebrew to be the language of the modern state of Israel, and Yiddish to be the language of revolutionaries told to abandon the tongue— that survived the war with them—once they were refugees outside of Europe. The relationship between Yiddish and Hebrew versus the state of Israel is not nearly so black and white, nor is Jewish identity *inherently* radical.

Jonathan Ross, writing for *The New York Times*, mused over the relationship wannabe-Yiddish speakers try to cultivate with the language, documenting the varying levels of projection that mirror my own preconceived notions of Yiddish's political meaning. "Because Yiddish culture in Europe was essentially destroyed, learning Yiddish in America has a surreal aspect, like planning a trip to a country that doesn't exist. The culture of the country can be anything you want – gay, feminist, secular, religious – and no one can tell you that you don't belong," he writes. "The destruction of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Europe was a lesson in the dangers of statelessness, the vulnerability of exile…[there is an] an element of…contradictory appeal, which is that it allows young Jews to reach past the Holocaust for a living culture, even as it bathes them in the soft aura of victimhood" (Roses 1996). This idea—that even Yiddish culture so-called "beyond" the Holocaust could not be divorced from the Holocaust itself, and that this in turn creates a sort of contradictory blank slate—bounced around in my mind for days after I

first encountered it. During my research and writing, I continued to ask myself: "What do *I* want Yiddish to mean?"

In Joshua B. Friedman's doctoral dissertation, entitled *Yiddish Returns: Language, Intergenerational Gifts, and Jewish Devotion* (2015), he focuses on Yiddish educational programs geared toward college-aged and graduate-level students. "Most Jews outside Ultra-Orthodox communities lack Yiddish proficiencies," writes Friedman, "Yet, by funding programs designed to promote Yiddish among college-aged and twenty-something students, donors address relationships of intergenerational transmission ideologically associated with families, by facilitating their management under non-profit auspices" (Friedman 2015, 1). Of particular note is Friedman's summation of 'new Yiddish space'—that is, a future for Yiddish that exists without the so-called "baggage" of its original speakers (*ibid*.). This raises interesting points of consideration for any person engaged in Yiddish research today: is a familial, historical, or religious connection a necessity for learning Yiddish, insofar as it provides some sort of intangible, impossible-to-describe emotional tether? Could Yiddish ever be anything but a Jewish language, for Jewish people?

Important to understand alongside the particulars of Yiddish history is the relationship between many Yiddish-speaking Jewish populations and leftist political affiliation and action. For our first Hanukkah together, my now-fiancé bought me a copy of *Revolutionary Yiddishland: A History of Jewish Radicalism* (2016), newly translated in English from the French. I devoured the text, independent of research goals, and much of what shaped my initial interest in my MA thesis topic came from the book. "Yiddishland"—that is, the world of Yiddish-speaking activists across Europe until the start of World War II—is "no more…if all those whose testimonies are gathered [in this book] belong to the camp of the vanquished, it is because they were politically

misled…they had linked their fate to the grand narrative of working-class emancipation, fraternity between peoples, socialist egalitarianism—rather than to that of a Jewish state solidly established on its ethnic foundations, territorial conquests and real-politik alliances" (Brossat & Klingberg 2016, ibid). Alain Brossat and Sylvia Klingberg argue that Israel made concentrated efforts to eradicate the memory of Yiddishland; it is not *reconstructable*, but it is *rememberable*.

It is worth contextualizing this argument, briefly: Zionism—the political movement to establish a Jewish state (prior to the state of Israel), and now a multi-faced ideology that broadly refers to the preservation and support of the modern state of Israel—originated in Europe in the late 1800s (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.). As a nation-building project, Zionism was instrumental in reviving Hebrew as an everyday language. In some ways, this was a true revival: prior to the efforts of Jewish settlers who joined pre-existing Jewish communities in what is now Israel, Hebrew had not been used as a language of common speech since the 2nd century. On the other hand, Hebrew had never entirely disappeared—it was, as is, used in prayer and Jewish liturgy daily. But Jews making *aliyah*[5] established Hebrew schools for children, while prominent Jewish writers and editors living in what is now Israel, like Eliezer ben-Yehuda, worked to create new words to enable spoken Hebrew to become a modern, everyday language. It is somewhat controversial to refer to the Hebrew spoken from the late 19th century to the present day as 'modern Hebrew,' given that what is spoken today is not wholly distinct from so-called 'biblical Hebrew.' Bernard Spolsky, a linguist writing about the history of Jewish languages, explains:

> During the two millennia when Jews were in exile and when they learned and spoke many other languages, Hebrew was almost always a significant part of their linguistic repertoire, as a sacred language for religious purposes and as a language of literacy. It was therefore not a matter of reviving a dead language, reconstructing it from ancient manuscripts (as with Cornish) or from isolated elderly speakers (as with Eyak). What was

[5] Literally "to go up"; in Jewish liturgy, this is the term for being called onto the *bimah* (dais) to read from the Torah; it is a colloquial term for Jews moving to settle permanently in the state of Israel.

> involved, rather, was the expansion of the domains in which the language was currently being used and an increase in the number of uses and users. (Spolsky 2014, 249)

From the beginning of Zionist-specific immigration to what is now the state of Israel, tension existed between Hebrew and Yiddish; by and large (though not universally), Zionists invested in the creation of a Jewish state were committed to Hebrew as a pillar of a nationalist identity grounded in a "return." In their eyes, Yiddish was the language of the Diaspora, of suffering; the promise of Zionism was an end to painful and endless wandering. "There was no room for bilingualism in this struggle," Hillel Halkin writes:

> European nationalism was an offspring of European romanticism, and like its parent, radically monistic. "One people, one language, one land" was the rallying cry of every national movement in Europe, a collectivized version of the romantic vision of autarkic selfhood. For late-19th- and early-20th-century Jewish nationalism, this meant living in Hebrew or in Yiddish, not in both. Either the people who spoke Yiddish would create a literature and a high culture in it, or the people whose high culture and literature were in Hebrew would learn to speak it again. In either case, the old order had to go. It is beside the point to look for the historical aggressor or aggressed-against in this war. Although it is common, and perhaps natural, to think of Yiddish as the revolutionary challenger and Hebrew as the *ancien régime* under attack, that is to take a simplistic view. Both languages, each in its way, were enlisted in support of revolution *and* tradition. If Yiddish was championed as a live vernacular overthrowing the oppression of a mummified holy tongue, or as the voice of the Jewish worker and woman demanding access to privileges long denied them by a Hebraic ruling class, it was also the flag of those who wished to stay safely put in a familiar Diaspora rather than make a bold new start in Zion as Hebrew-speaking pioneers. (Halkin 2002)

Yiddish in the United States

It is certainly important to grasp the broad strokes of each language's relationship to Jewish people—against the backdrop of major waves of immigration, the Holocaust, and geopolitical struggle and triumph in the creation of the modern state of Israel. But for the purpose of this thesis, it is more vital to remember that Yiddish has had an unbroken and distinctive presence in

the United States since the earliest Jewish immigrants arrived on its shores.[6] I opened this thesis with a sobering reminder of how many Yiddish speakers perished in Europe at the hands of fascists. This history is critical; the violence committed against scores of European Jews irrevocably altered the course of the language worldwide. But Yiddish in the United States has existed in tandem with Europe from the beginning. "As specific as its history might be," Stavans and Lambert remind us, "like any language, Yiddish is, for all intents and purposes, infinitely capacious; you can say anything in Yiddish that you want. And, of course, in America, all kinds of people have done so: factory owners and Communists, Hasidic Jews and Christian missionaries, anarchists and political fixers, scientists and quacks" (Stavans & Lambert 2020, xix). The partisan and ghetto music that *A Besere Velt* sings came from Europe, composed in moments of astounding violence. It is sung by people whose relatives saw this violence first-hand *and* by those whose families were speaking Yiddish in the United States an ocean apart from the partisans fighting for their lives. The language is the same, and yet transformed by political and geographic context.

In the context of my own work within the Folklore discipline, I am eager to understand the possibilities (and limitations) of singing Yiddish partisan music in the United States. How much does our geography—and our own Yiddish history—change and shape the boundaries of remembrance, reverence, and connection? That is: are the members of *A Besere Velt* attempting to bring back something that can never exist again? Or, are they constructing a new Yiddishland—a new world of Yiddish culture, language, and political dreams and ambitions? (This thesis will, ultimately, argue the latter.) How much dialogue exists between the old and the

[6] The first documented Jews to arrive in what is now the United States arrived sometime around 1645, and were of Spanish (Sephardic) extraction.

new worlds of Yiddish? What does this dialogue reveal about individual and collective struggle and perseverance? And who decides?

It is important here to note that there is much debate amongst Yiddishists over whether it is fair or not to characterize Yiddish as experiencing a "revival" when the language has never fallen out of use with the most religious (and insular) Jews in the country. "The language has become synonymous with Orthodox Judaism and has lost its meaning within the secular parts of the faith," Tanya Basu wrote in a 2014 *Atlantic* article; "It's a dying language among mainstream Jewish Americans but a thriving one among the Hasidim, who speak the language almost exclusively" (Basu 2014). Is this dichotomy indicative of a problem? It depends on whom you ask. Michael Wex, the author of *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All Its Moods* speculates that a younger generation's interest in keeping Yiddish a viable language has to do explicitly with keeping a secular tradition going. "The American Jewish middle class is well entrenched and the culture and stigma attached to Yiddish have gone and vanished," he said in the aforementioned *Atlantic* article, referring to a post-Holocaust disassociation of postwar Jews from their culture in an effort to become Americanized. "The vast population of Jews have the vaguest idea of what their religion is: They know about the Holocaust, Israel, holidays, and foods, but beyond that, people don't know that much. [Speaking Yiddish] is a way to assert and flaunt Jewish identity publicly without necessarily connecting yourself with religious beliefs. Yiddish rises above denominations" (ibid.).

Sonya Taaffe of *A Besere Velt* similarly ruminated on Yiddish's American reputation as a vehicle of humor and dramatic emotional highs and lows:

> Of course, a lot of Yiddish has come into English in invective forms and local colorful, theatrical language, which is why I made myself obnoxious in the chorus last year by saying—we should do an entire concert in Yiddish love songs, because you can do a lot

> more in Yiddish than just curse at people, even though the curses are admittedly *absolutely fantastic*. (Taaffe, 2020)

Lenny Bruce famously quipped in his landmark act 'Jewish vs. Goyishe': "If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish," he said. "It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyishe even if you're Jewish" (Bruce 1961). Americans have adopted *oy* and *schmooze* and *schlep* handily; your average *schmuck* hardly needs to have the meanings of *chutzpah* and *kitsch* explained. Yiddish for widespread consumption is often so divorced from the people who spoke (and speak) it that it is almost less than a jargon in our collective consciousness. Yiddish can be an exercise in nostalgia, or a signifier of an identity—or it can be something that's accessible for the masses, flattened and divorced from the people who died (both peacefully and violently) with Yiddish on their tongue. Trying to answer questions of authenticity, meaning, ownership of a language, and commercialization is difficult; *Fiddler on the Roof* is fun for the whole family.[7]

Project and research development

The preceding section speaks primarily to a few dominant (but by no means exhaustive) aspects of Yiddish in America: humor and commercialization. It would take many more volumes to examine every Yiddish influence on American cultural forms—particularly in pop culture and entertainment. Yiddish has appeared in theater, jazz, comedy sets in the Catskills, radio hours, newspapers, periodicals, and film (just to name a few). The influence Yiddish has had on our

[7] *Fiddler on the Roof* is a musical based on the 'Tevye the Dairyman" stories written by acclaimed Yiddish author Sholom Alecheim. The musical follows Tevye, a Jew living in the Russian Pale of Settlement (the area in which Jews were permitted to settle within the Russian Empire) in a small village with his wife and five daughters. The show features heavily into American imaginations of Jewish *shtetl* life (small, frequently rural Jewish villages), and its aesthetics have helped shape conceptions of Jewish behaviors, music, attire, language, and mannerisms since its Broadway premiere and subsequent film adaptation.

American cultural landscape in undeniable, even if it is not immediately obvious. In the context of modern American Jewish studies, questions of nostalgia and cultural engagement as religious practice (Gross 2021), secular Jewish identities (Wertheimer 2018), and shifting demographics and more expansive definitions of who gets to be a Jew (Mnookin 2018) are heavyweight conversations driving contemporary scholarship. Yiddish touches each of these questions acutely: nostalgia, secularism, and a widening Jewish tent have made Yiddish more relevant in the United States than ever.

Ultimately, for the purposes of this project, it is most important how the Yiddish speakers who sing in *A Besere Velt* relate to and understand the language, themselves. Norm Berman, the child of Holocaust survivors, summarized Yiddish thusly: "…Yiddish was our *mamaloshen*, it was the currency of our conversation and our culture and everything else. It elevated it, in a way. It wasn't just the language that we brought with us when we came to the States and then there was this pressure to assimilate. It was something to hold onto because it was something in our core, it was how we could truly speak to each other." Taaffe, who is in her late thirties, said:

> I do think of it as a political language. I do tend to associate it with the left wing. I know that 'Yiddish speakers' and 'socialists' are not actually a perfect overlap—there's like a million Hassidim who also speak Yiddish who would probably have very negative feelings about me personally for just about every reason in my life.
>
> But I do…I do associate it more with the Worker's Circle then with the Hasidic movement. And I tend to think of it oddly in some ways. It is a ghost language…But nonetheless, I don't think of it as a backwards-looking language. I don't think of it as a reactionary movement. I seem to have come out personally thinking of it as a very contemporary language. And part of this is, you know, self-selecting the people I know who engage with it. I do it both as an act of remembrance and an act carried forward. (Taaffe 2020)

My research reflects more than a year's worth of ethnographic work, limited geographically but not substantively by the COVID-19 pandemic. I first became aware of the Boston Worker's Circle and *A Besere Velt* through Rebecca Long, at the Jewish Women's Archive, where I am a

regular columnist. She joined *A Besere Velt* in 2017, and her enthusiasm for the group piqued my interest in tracing their development, growth, demographics, and performance style. The project came together rapidly before I set foot on campus for graduate school; though I had applied intending to write about abortion storytelling, I discovered the Yiddish partisan song *Zog nit Keynmol* ("Never Say") on a visit to the Tucson Jewish History Museum in May 2019, and quickly connected to radical Jewish resistance music. In my post for the Jewish Women's Archive that month, I wrote:

> *What broke the spell? It didn't happen all at once. In May, I spent time at the Jewish History Museum in Tucson, where I grabbed a pamphlet about Jewish partisans emblazoned with the mantra that carried so many through the war:* Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg *(Never say that you have reached the final road). A month later, I started packing my books in boxes and rediscovered the text Max bought me for Hanukkah three years ago,* Revolutionary Yiddishland*. Finally, two weeks ago, my feet propped up on a couch and my browser open to a webpage with recordings of the music of Holocaust resistance, I asked Max, "What if I studied Jewish partisans and learned Yiddish and traveled to archives that have saved their materials?" He raised his eyebrows. "That sounds extremely up your alley." I grinned for the rest of the day.*
>
> *It's hard to explain how urgent this topic feels. On the one hand, it seems obvious to want to draw strength from Jewish individuals who fought back in a time of political crisis. The other appeal is one that exists for me on an almost primal level—it's the reason I was able, despite having zero stomach for violence, to sit through* Inglorious Basterds*. I wanted (and still want) to see Jewish people not just survive, but actively protect themselves and their communities. I am old enough now to understand that safety is not guaranteed and that passivity is not an option against fascism.*
>
> *Of course, Jewish partisans are far more compelling than any revenge fantasy cooked up by Quentin Tarantino because they were* real *and braver than I'm ever likely to be. They deserve my academic attention, and personal gratitude.*

After editing the piece, my editor told me she would be happy to put me in touch with *A Besere Velt*. I drafted a note, which Rebecca graciously forwarded to *A Besere Velt*'s listserv, or as they refer to it, the 'Schmooze List.'

After that initial email, I received eight enthusiastic responses from interested consultants; after sending a reminder message, I had ten confirmed interviewees. Shortly after securing funding for a planned trip to Boston in June 2020—during which I intended to conduct both individual and group interviews, as well at sit-in during rehearsals and a community performance—the COVID-19 pandemic eliminated the possibility of travel and in-person ethnographic research. After considering the limitations and possibilities that a virtual medium might present, I began to schedule interviews via Zoom with the members of *A Besere Velt* who had expressed initial interest in participating in this project. From August until November, I conducted biweekly two-hour interviews. Ultimately, I completed 11 phone interviews, four interviews via email, and obtained data from an additional fourteen respondents via Google Forms. As expected, our conversations were wide-ranging; my prewritten questions functioned as a roadmap from which deviation and free association were both welcomed and encouraged. In many cases, questions were answered before I asked them—for example, asking about someone's previous exposure to the Yiddish language would usually result in stories of familial ties to Yiddish speakers.

I took time to familiarize myself with the *A Besere Velt* songbook; partisan and ghetto music is a sizable portion of their repertoire, but it is not the lion's share. I also watched through all available Youtube clips of *A Besere Velt* performances, to get a feel for the flow of a typical performance. I was moved listening to clips of *A Besere Velt* singing; I had worried that I would not feel an emotional connection to the music that I had anticipated from attending a live performance. With this preparation completed, I began my interviews in earnest, allowing the chorus members who had so graciously agreed to participate in this project steer me toward Jewish resistance and joy as they experience it.

The work proceeds in the following order: Chapter one discusses the history of *A Besere Velt* and the Worker's Circle, including a survey of Jewish identity circulated among the chorus members. I utilize the interviews I conducted with *A Besere Velt* chorus members to provide a nuanced portrait of the varying motivations and affiliations of the group, with an emphasis on each individual's relationship to Jewishness and the Yiddish language. I also provide an in-depth look at the partisan and ghetto songs most frequently performed by *A Besere* Velt. Chapter two situates primarily considers the creation of new Jewish traditions and rituals through the lens of performance theory, in service of situating partisan and ghetto songs within a broader Jewish folk canon. In this chapter, I examine how chorus members create meaning through the performance of partisan music, the construction of Jewish space, and the promise of Jewish futures.

CHAPTER ONE

A Besere Velt, the Worker's Circle, and Jewish identity

A Besere Velt ("A Better World") formed in 1997 at the Worker's Circle Center for Jewish Culture and Social Justice in Boston (formerly the Work*men*'s Circle). The Worker's Circle is a community space built for secular Jewish life, founded over a hundred years ago by Jewish immigrants, focused on cultural engagement, preservation and political action. *Der Arbeter Ring*'s (Yiddish, 'the Worker's Circle') mission—"Jewish culture for a just world"—sprang from a desire for solidarity in an unfamiliar and largely hostile country:

> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe to the United States reached explosive proportions. Many of the newly arrived immigrants had made great sacrifices and endured many hardships to reach the United States, a land where they thought they would find welcome and have opportunities denied them in their homelands. When they arrived, many were shocked by what greeted them in America: a land of freedom and opportunity to be sure, but one, too, of exploitative labor practices, blighted and overcrowded tenements, ethnic rivalries, and the daunting job of assimilating into an unfamiliar culture. The newcomers recognized the importance of facing these challenges with a unified front, and of keeping traditional and deeply-held Jewish values of community and social justice alive. (The Workers Circle 2020)

By 1940, there were 100 community centers and branches of the Worker's Circle across the United States (Boston Workmen's Circle 2020). By 1940, 145 *shuln* (with at least a dozen in Massachusetts), 19 choruses, nine summer camps, nine drama societies, and "several mandolin orchestras" existed, coast to coast (ibid).[8] *A Besere Velt* is not the only Worker's Circle-affiliated Yiddish-singing chorus in the history of the organization (or Yiddish-singing chorus in

[8] *Shul* is the Yiddish word for synagogue—though it shares origins with the German word for 'school.' This underscores the relationship between Jewish houses of worship and learning—especially in the case of the Worker's Circle, which is less focused on religious observance.

the United States, more broadly), but it was the first formed after a period of closures nationwide for many formerly thriving Worker's Circle branches. From their website, again:

> By the 1960s, Workmen's Circle membership in Boston and around the country had significantly declined. Within 10 years the Boston chorus had disbanded and the last remaining Shule in Massachusetts, located at our current Brookline address, had closed its doors. In the late 1980s, the Shule reopened under the leadership of a group of activists who had come of age in the 1960s and wanted a secular, progressive Jewish education for their young children. At the same time, young adults seeking to reconnect with the language and culture of their roots reinvigorated Yiddish language programming at the Workmen's Circle. Together they generated a new wave of growth. Membership has steadily climbed since the late 1990s, and Boston Workmen's Circle is once again a thriving organization – with educational programming for children and adults, a 90-member Yiddish Community Chorus, a broad scope of social activism, vibrant young adult community, and more. (ibid.)

Unlike more traditional and religious synagogue spaces, Worker's Circle understands Jewish identity primarily as a cultural rather than religious inheritance. This is not to suggest Worker's Circle exists in opposition to religious Jewish spaces; on the contrary, many members also belong to *shuls.* It's just that the Circle and the *shul* satisfy different (though often overlapping) needs: social, communal, and spiritual. On the issue of Yiddish, their website concludes:

> Yiddish was once the primary language of our founders and the majority of our members. Today, we are widely known and respected for leading the world's largest Yiddish language program in the world, which has served as a central force in the renaissance of fascination and creativity in Yiddish culture — including literature, music, and theater. Historically, the Workers Circle raised a crucial voice in the struggles of American labor. Today, we are a bulwark in the fight for the dignity and economic rights of immigrants, safety and fairness in labor practices, strengthening our democracy, fighting white nationalism, and acting as a partner in the fight to end centuries of systemic racism in the United States — in short, working to realize the dreams and promises that brought our organization's founders to this nation. (The Worker's Circle 2020)

Mike Katz and Linda Gritz, two of several *A Besere Velt* founders, recalled that they were amongst a sizeable group of community members who felt that the Worker's Circle did not have enough Yiddish in its children's programming, despite *Yiddishkeit* (Yiddish culture) being a central tenet of the organization more broadly. "I was on the steering committee of our *shule*, at

our Yiddish cultural, Jewish cultural center Sunday school that we ran for kids," Katz said. He continued:

> I was in the group that felt that we weren't meeting enough, and that we didn't have enough Yiddish in our curriculum…I was looking very strongly for ways to enhance the Yiddish content and to have more contact time with both the children and the parents. And came up with this idea, having grown up in New York and having been in a chorus, we came up with this idea of having a Yiddish chorus as part of the voluntary time before *shule* started. Basically, kids and parents would come in early, sing with us…And it never really worked. We did have some people who were very into it, but it wasn't universal enough. And what we've discovered is there were a whole lot of parents who wanted to continue it—and less kids. So we decided to split it off from the *shule*…it basically came down to continuing as a mixed-generation chorus, but not specifically as a young people's chorus. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Michael Felsen, another founder who was serving on the steering committee of the *shule* in 1997, remembered the process of securing Lisa Gallatin as the first chorus director as one intimately tied to Jewish identity and expression:

> It came to my mind that Lisa was this great grassroots chorus director, and that she might be interested in doing this. We approached her at a birthday party for a mutual friend. And she said, "well, I really haven't been very engaged with my Jewish identity. It's not a major part of who I am. But, let me think about it." And Lisa thought about it and she said, "you know what, I'd like to give it a try." And then we had our first meeting of people who were interested—I think it was about 20 people, something like that—and it took off from there. (Felsen 2020)

Why a Yiddish chorus? Many members of *A Besere Velt* described song, particularly communally shared song, as a medium that felt both broadly accessible and inherently rich. Norm Berman, a native Yiddish speaker, remembered joining *A Besere Velt* with his young daughter in the hopes of sharing the language in a way that didn't feel instructional or mandatory:

> I joined *A Besere Velt* one year after it was officially founded. I think I read about it in a Jewish newspaper. And there was just a little piece in the bottom that said the Yiddish Chorus Circle. And I thought, "oh, my God, this would be a wonderful thing." I had grown up speaking Yiddish—it was actually my first language. And so it was exciting for me. But also for my daughter Rachel, who was nine at the time. I had been looking for a way to introduce her to Yiddish…I felt that there was richness there and something of value. And, you know, it's hard to take a child and sit down and say, look, I'm going to

> teach you Yiddish. But the notion of this being an activity that the two of us could do together struck me as a way to make the introduction. And so I told her, I said, "look, you and I are going to do this one thing. We're going to go join a chorus." (Berman 2020)

Nearly every member of *A Besere Velt* that I interviewed for this project made a point to suggest the Yiddish language functions as both a conduit through which to express Jewishness and progressive and radical politics, and a symbol of Jewishness and radical politics in and of itself—for themselves, and for non-Jews. Linda Gritz said:

> For us, our Yiddish, again, radical *Yiddishkeit*—it's our whole ethnic identity. We don't have a religion. Radical Yiddishkeit is our ethnic identity. Someone can say they're Italians, somebody can say they're Greek. We're Jewish, ethnically, and we have a sense of social justice rooted in that tradition of the enlightenment of the 1800s, in Europe, where the poor Jewish masses woke up, and were awakened, by great thinkers. There's a modern Yiddish literature canon. The Yiddish language absorbed all these radical concepts and aspirations and songs and stories. All the lullabies we sang to our kids in Yiddish were progressive—the lullabies are social justice themed, as opposed to rockabye baby. It's always brought in. You start from babyhood, and absorb these principles of radical *Yiddishkeit*. And that, to me, is Yiddish culture. I recognize, though, that I'm picking and choosing my piece of Yiddish. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Similarly, Michael Felsen identified family background and history first when defining what being Jewish means to him—adherence to and belief in religious Judaism was not a factor:

> I think being a Jew, being Jewish… to me is having a pretty long line of ancestors of a particular culture. While I find religious beliefs to often be problematic to the extent that they divide people, and sometimes demonize people…Again, I'm not a big student of Jewish history, but obviously it's a very long history. It's an extremely rich history. Having grown up in a family that were refugees from Germany and having experienced anti-Semitism very directly…most of my identity is about just the golden rule—treating others in a humane and kind way, regardless of sectoral affiliations. There's this great value in cultural diversity…(Felsen 2020)

Felsen described Yiddish as a kind of shorthand; a way to express solidarity with not only the Jews that came before him in his own *mishpoche boym* (family tree), but also those who founded the Worker's Circle.

> I think about the experience of Jewish immigrants, especially at the turn of the century, the previous century, moving into the Lower East Side. Yiddish was the language of the poor working person. It was the language of solidarity, a bond between folks. And, you know, recognizing that so much the Jewish history of the past six hundred years took

> place in Eastern Europe, where Yiddish was the common language. To the extent language represents culture, language is culture. I became very respectful of the interest in and the importance of trying to preserve Yiddish as a language, not let it die…. And so for me to be in a Yiddish chorus that sings predominantly Yiddish songs…I find it very meaningful. (Felsen 2020)

Rebecca Long, a younger (under 30) member of *A Besere Velt*, said:

> It feels genuinely Jewish, to want to sing in this choir, because these are songs—for example, the old labor songs—that people really sang. These are songs from the Vilna Ghetto that people really sang…And it just feels like tapping into this culture in a deeper way than even going to synagogue, for me, where I'd be reciting prayers in languages I don't fully understand, saying things I don't fully agree with…This is the language of the *shetl* and revolution; a language that was really close to being murdered, now being resurrected for a radical purpose, which is really inspiring. I see it as a language of resistance…I think the way I see these songs being most applicable is that they kind of suggest that there is no way to work within the system to achieve justice. And that's what I see as being the most useful information from them. There is a degree of like, troublemaking and not just troublemaking, but sometimes violent troublemaking, with real risks involved in achieving justice. (Long 2020)

Long's comment on her singing as an expression of *genuine* Jewishness (as opposed to Judaism and Jewish religious practice) strikes at questions of identity that are undoubtedly relevant to my own thesis arguments: what does it mean to be 'genuinely' Jewish? In the context of my own exploration of how *A Besere Velt* interprets Jewish culture and music in the present day, Long's mention of singing with *A Besere Velt* as feeling like a way to "tap into this culture in a deeper way…than going to synagogue" is telling. She does not dismiss the act of going to synagogue as some kind of lesser expression of Jewishness—but rather an established one. This, too, can be understood as a neutral assertion; certainly, attending synagogue is generally considered to be a Jewish act. But she crucially frames her engagement with *A Besere Velt* versus the synagogue as a way to strike at the heart of Jewish *culture*, rather than faith—setting up separate spheres that often, but do not *always*, overlap. Similarly, Mike Katz and Linda Gritz said:

> [MK] In order to stay Jewish, and we clearly have made a decision to stay Jewish, we are not assimilated…in order to stay Jewish without having to be a member of the synagogue, being a "card carrying" Jew, it was a choice we made. You have to think a

> lot, and consciously make choices about what parts you accept and what parts you don't accept, and what parts you use and what parts you don't use. So, Linda's the chair of our ritual committee, and ritual we put in quotes because we specifically don't do ritual as most synagogues would. We change it constantly.
>
> [LG] It's not rote, it's not performed the same way each year without thought. So that's another part of our being Jewish—celebrating most of the holidays. But for each holiday, we extract the radical, and we interpret it radically.
>
> [MK] I mean, we celebrate Shabbos! It's the first workers' holiday. And people can say, oh, you're ignoring the important part, the religious components, but…I think in every holiday there is a secular lesson that can be extracted. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur don't have to be about making oaths to God. It can be, simply—I wronged you, and I need to fix that.
>
> [LG] Acknowledging when you didn't hit the mark—it's a universal lesson.
>
> [MK] It's all tied into how we choose to live our lives. Because there's no textbook. There's no *Gemara*[9] for being a secular Yiddishist! We have to make choices everyday—as individuals, and as a community. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

There are many points of note worth extracting from this exchange, chief among them the idea that Jewishness outside of Judaism requires flexibility, the reinterpretation of tradition, and consciously made choices. Bob Follansbee, a member of *A Besere Velt* who converted to Judaism in the early 1980s, said:

> What I've always loved about it, even before I kind of became a little more critical of some of the mainstream Jewish stuff—I've always valued the moral compass that it gives. And frankly, my moral compass—I mean, I'm definitely not a religious person at all. So the irony, of course, is that I converted to anything. But I feel really comfortable at the Worker's Circle because I feel like I can be an atheist, but an atheist who believes in all the values. And I think that that's kind of where I connect to the idea of being Jewish. You know, I have this conversation with my son pretty regularly. He's become much more religion-skeptical in his thirties, and he says, "wouldn't it be better if there just weren't religions at all?"
>
> But I like the fact that there's a texture in life. And that texture is given by the fact that there are different cultural traditions. Not that there's really one that's better than another. And I feel like I've adopted a lot of that texture of the Jewish world. So that's how I value being Jewish, and the process of becoming Jewish. I don't know what I would do if I didn't have a Worker's Circle to be a part of—I don't know where I'd be in that sense. I don't think I could do a regular synagogue thing. (Follansbee 2020)

[9] *Gemara* refers to one half of the texts that together comprise what is known as rabbinic Judaism.

Follansbee's status as a convert is particularly enlightening. In a sense, he has chosen his Jewish identity twice over: both in joining the Jewish people through a religious journey, and then as an active, politically engaged member of the Worker's Circle, participating in *A Besere Velt* and expressing his identity and relationship to Judaism through song. Similarly, Rebecca Long expanded on her comments relating to authenticity by articulating Jewishness as a set of actions one chooses to engage in, again and again:

> I've seen Jewishness and it's a verb. It's a responsibility. How lucky am I that I am a part of this culture, part of this ethnicity, part of this religion, that calls me to care about other people? I think everyone has a responsibility to care about other people. But I see so much of Judaism as being about questioning authority. And I think that in synagogue, in a more traditional sense, it's about investigating the Torah. What is the Torah, really? I think that now that I'm in this different context, I can see that the questioning is applied to all parts of life. And that also means challenging. That means fighting for this pursuit of justice. And I definitely think for me, it's linked to Yiddish song now. I was there before I joined the choir… but so much of transforming my idea of Judaism was wrapped up in this choir. (Long 2020)

Sonya Taaffe identified Jewishness as something so intrinsic to her sense of self that she couldn't imagine being who she is without it:

> It is one of the things that I can't imagine about myself being different, which is how I know it's meaningful. If I am asked to define myself, I tend to talk about the things that I'm interested in, the things that I do, more than the things that I am. The two exceptions to that are—that I do say in as unambiguous as possible terms are—I am Jewish and I am queer. And those things are core enough, because I can't imagine them being different. I think I would be an entirely different person. Like it's conceivable for me to imagine not having trained as a classicist. I think it's unlikely because there's such a nexus of things in that scholarship that interested me: time, language, transmission of stories, nuts and bolts of how you breaks down language and the ways in which stories shape and transform something that you inherit as a child. You know, everybody gets, like, the cheap version of Greek myths, and then you grow up and you discover that, in fact, the ancient Greek religion is wilder and stranger and much more complicated and on some level much more or entirely inaccessible than anything you have access to. So, I would have naturally gravitated for that. But that's a degree, you know—that's a thing that I went out and I got. It's not an inherent part of myself. The thing that's the inherent part of myself is the interest in stories, time, liminal spaces, et cetera, et cetera. But being Jewish is one of the things that I cannot imagine what I would look like without that, because it is important to me. (Taaffe 2020)

Similarly, Mae Tupa, a celebrated artist and one of *A Besere Velt's* octogenarian members responded simply in the affirmative when asked what being Jewish means to her:

> [JOS] And in whatever way you want to answer this: what does being Jewish mean to you?
>
> [MT] Well, I *am* [*laughs*]. (Tupa 2020)

The idea of an intangible sense of self—inherent, immovable, and in many cases, indivisible, from personal identity cropped up, in one way or another, in almost every interview. Michael Felsen summarized his Jewishness by saying: "…I'm proud to be involved with an organization and a history that stands for social justice. I'm proud of saying, yes, I am Jewish. No one's going to tell me I'm not Jewish." (Felsen 2020).

Many members of *A Besere Velt* spoke to the idea of transformation in their conceptualizations of what Judaism and Jewish identity could look like or connote, via Yiddish music, secular community, and the sense of social justice that buoys the Worker's Circle. Above all, nearly every member interviewed identified Jewishness—if not Judaism as a faith system—as a lifestyle choice that requires everyday investment.

Demographics

To put these responses in context, *A Besere Velt* currently has around fifty active members, with ages ranging from mid-20s to mid-80s. A majority of the chorus members identity as white, of Ashkenazic background and descent. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the group averaged three rehearsals a month, with some coordinated social opportunity generally centered around community engagement (i.e., member-led organizing to make a presence at a protest; potlucks, etc.) It is relevant here to make note of the general demographics of *A Besere Velt*: primarily regarding age, Yiddish skills, engagement with other

Jewish-affiliated organizations, and membership in synagogues. Beyond my solicited one-on-one and group interviews, I also created a brief survey via Google Forms that was sent out to the entire *A Besere Velt* email listserv—completely optional, with the opportunity to remain anonymous. I asked participants to speak to their relationship to Yiddish; the ways in which their interest in the language had (or had not) changed since joining *A Besere Velt*; if they were active in other Jewish-affiliated groups of any kind; what age range they fell into (20s, 30s, 40s, etc.). Though this was not a survey answered by every single member of *A Besere Velt*, the responses I did receive provided a snapshot that roughly matched what I had been told during phone interviews.

Nearly eighty-one percent of respondents were over fifty years of age and a similar proportion considered engagement with the Worker's Circle more broadly to be their primary form of engagement with a Jewish organization—though many mentioned their connections to organizations beyond the Worker's Circle to be circumstantial (i.e., when they had school-aged children, they sent them to Yiddish-based summer camps like Kinder Ring and Kinderland, or they themselves attended such camps as children). A sizeable minority were active members of synagogues of various strains; most leaned Reform or Reconstructionist.[10] And many identified affiliations with social justice minded groups like Bend the Arc: Jewish Action, with a particular emphasis on immigration issues.[11]

[10] Reform Judaism here refers to synagogues and practice affiliated with the Reform movement—which began in the 1800s and affirms the Torah as Divinely-inspired, but not necessarily Divinely-written. Reform Judaism embraces interfaith families and patrilineal descent. Reconstructionist Judaism was born in the United States—founded by Mordecai Kaplan, a former Orthodox rabbi. Reconstructionist Jews embrace Jewish faith practices as equally important to Jewish traditions, cultures, and folkways.

[11] Bend the Arc: Jewish Action is an organization that mobilizes and organizes progressive Jews in the United States.

In terms of Yiddish skills and Yiddish connections, most had at least some familial ties to the language. A few respondents (several of whom I interviewed on the record) are native Yiddish speakers. Most members of *A Besere Velt* who participated in the survey circled around Yiddish as a heritage language—that is, regardless of how many generations removed they might be from a fluent, native speaker, they felt compelled to engage with the language in some shape or form. Some notable responses included:

> *I studied Yiddish language for a few years around the same time I joined ABV (in 2004). I'd probably call myself an "advanced beginner" in the language -- I'm good with grammar, pronunciation, and probably have the vocabulary of an idiosyncratic 10-year-old. I can speak enough to make myself understood in a social situation. I enjoy having some familiarity with the language, and understanding some of the language allows me to better enjoy participation in the chorus and other Yiddish arts.*
>
> *Yiddish is my heritage language, and I've learned to speak it as an adult. I'm a relatively advanced speaker (I regularly attend Yiddish immersion retreats), but there's still plenty I don't know about the language. My interest in Yiddish was already high when I joined ABV. In the chorus, I find myself speaking up for using the language more, not interrupting Yiddish songs with verses translated into English, and using spoken Yiddish in our concert narration between songs.*
>
> *Some friends had grandmothers who spoke Yiddish. Many words were in the lexicon of my majority Jewish suburban community. I found a soulful connection once I started to sing the Yiddish songs.*
>
> *I grew up hearing Yiddish, but not speaking it. At summer camp (Camp Kinderland), I learned a lot of songs in Yiddish. Since joining ABV, I've thought more and more about trying to actually learn the language. Time is the biggest barrier, but I keep thinking about it.*
>
> *I had no connection to Yiddish until my wife joined the chorus. Then I was drawn to the community by the rich culture and politics in the songs they sang. Maybe 7 years ago I joined. My current goal for Yiddish skill level is to knowing and understanding the words I am singing by our end of season concerts.*

Though many members spoke with a sense of pride about their varying degrees of Yiddish language skills, equally as moving are the accounts of those who are seeking a "soulful connection," in the words of one participant.

Partisan and ghetto songs

The repertoire of *A Besere Velt* has been flexible since its inception. Derek David, the current musical director, and several founding members of the chorus described the process for rotating songs in and out of their performance lineup as being largely organic. Several partisan songs, like "Zog nit Keynmol," have not left the rotation since the beginning of the group—even if "Zog nit Keynmol" is not sung at *A Besere Velt*'s yearly concert, for example, it is inevitably sung for a protest appearance, Holocaust memorialization event, or Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemoration. The selection process is not, however, democratic: it is the role of the music director (David is the third since *A Besere Velt*'s founding) to shape each season's catalog. According to Mike Katz and Linda Gritz, members can make suggestions of songs they'd like to see the group perform, but it is often a years-long process from suggestion to integration. Both Katz and Gritz emphasized, however, that *A Besere Velt* is much closer to a democratically assembled chorus that others. "In most choruses," Katz laughed, "The director usually has every say. So, this framework of ours is somewhat unique" (Katz & Gritz, 2020).

What's most important about *A Besere Velt's* song repertoire is that each choice reflects their broader mission and focus: Yiddish, *Yiddishkeit*, and social justice. Mike Katz and Linda Gritz summarized:

> [MK] Well you know, a lot of our music…we've certainly done ghetto-centric or Holocaust-centric programs. That's certainly part of where we are. But a lot of our most beloved music goes back long before. The partisans to the labor movement, to the sweatshop poets, etc. So, a lot of the music that we build on is quite a bit older than the Holocaust music. But as a Yiddish chorus, we certainly can't ignore the Holocaust. But we also don't make it our only focus.
>
> [LG] Right. And when we commemorate the Holocaust, we focus on the resistance. We mourn the six million, deeply. Many were my family members, many were my ancestors. But when we do a program, you can go to many places for a Holocaust program of mourning. We certainly mourn, but when we sing music from the Holocaust, we try to tell the whole story. We give context.

> [MK] Which is all of our concerts, by the way. All of our concerts have significant history. Because we're evangelists, of a sort.
>
> [LG] We also have to translate our songs because most of our audience doesn't speak Yiddish. But we feel it's very important to give that context. But we've done several major Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemoration concerts. And we've start with before the war. We sing "Es Brent" which was written in 1938, to tell the story before the war starting. Concentration camps, Holocaust resistance, ghettos, culminating in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. And then the aftermath…(Katz & Gritz 2020)

Drawing boundaries around *A Besere Velt*'s repertoire is crucial to understanding the meaning and possibilities of their performance—and Jewish performance more broadly within the confines of this thesis project. Derek David summarized his role and goal as music director:

> I'm there on this sort of personal artistic mission, to promote an art that has been lost. And so in my eyes, for a chorus that very much defines itself as a radical left wing, Yiddish, social justice chorus, I try to provide real arrangements, not just folk-styled arrangements, real arrangements of a work to legitimize and to honor the Jewish world of music, which has been so cut down.[12] (David 2020)

In order to understand the world in which Yiddish-speaking Jewish partisans were composing music, I reached for Shirli Gilbert's landmark exploration of the music produced by Jews imprisoned under the Nazi regime, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps.* Gilbert documents the music written, composed, and sung during the Holocaust as a social history—meaning she is not merely recording facts, but exploring the emotions and motivations of community members with regards to their creative expressions. Gilbert hypothesizes that many of the songs composed and sung by Jewish partisans were purposefully broad in their lyricism. The most famous partisan song of all time, *Zog nit keynmol* (Never Say), written by Hirsh Glik while he was imprisoned in the Vilna Ghetto, is "…less a battle cry than a

[12] Here, David is not insinuating that partisan and ghetto music are not within the bounds of Jewish folk or folklore as outlined by this project. Rather, he is speaking from the perspective of a musician concerned with the arrangements of music for performance: here, "folk arrangement" in the style of spontaneous, communal singing.

defiant affirmation of Jewish endurance" (Gilbert 2005, 72). Though the song contains a few passing references to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (the news of which served as the direct catalyst for Glick's writing), the words were "…directed far more forcefully towards a larger context of Jewish suffering and existence" (ibid.). This, Gilbert argues, is key. "The secret to Glik's optimism lay in its function of collective rather than individual survival," she writes. "The song's 'we'…did not refer only to the partisans…Rather, it was the all-encompassing 'we' of the Jewish people, who had wandered among foreign lands" (ibid.).

Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg ('Never say that you are walking the final road') is the most frequently performed partisan song in the world—a standard of Holocaust memorials and memorialization, and known colloquially as *the* 'Partisans' Song' (ibid.). The lyrics, translated into English, are as follows:

English Translation	**Yiddish Transliteration**
From green palm-land to distant land of snow, *We arrive with our pain, with our sorrow,* *And where a spurt of our blood has fallen,* *There will sprout our strength, our courage.*	*Fun grinem palmenland biz vaysn land fun shney,* *Mir kumen on mit undzer payn, mit undzer vey,* *Un vu gefaln s'iz a shprits fun undzer blut,* *Shprotsn vet dort undzer gvure, undzer mut!*
The morning sun will tinge our today with gold, *And yesterday will vanish with the enemy,* *But if the sun and the dawn are delayed –* *Like a watchword this song will go from generation to generation.*	*S'vet di morgnzun bagildn undz dem haynt,* *Un der nekhtn vet farshvindn mit dem faynt,* *Nor oyb farzamen vet di zun in dem kayor –* *Vi a parol zol geyn dos lid fun dor tsu dor.*
This song is written with blood and not with lead, *It's not a song about a bird that is free,* *A people, between falling walls,* *Sang this song with pistols in their hands.*	*Dos lid geshribn iz mit blut, un nit mit blay,* *S'iz nit keyn lidl fun a foygl oyf der fray,* *Dos hot a folk tsvishn falndike vent* *Dos lid gezungen mit naganes in di hent.*

So never say that you are walking the final road
Though leaden skies obscure blue days.
The hour we have been longing for will still come –
Our steps will drum – we are here!

To zog nit keyn mol, az du geyst dem letstn veg,
Khotsh himlen blayene farshteln bloye teg.
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho –
S'vet a poyk ton undzer trot: mir zaynen do!

According to Shmerke Kaczerginski, a partisan compatriot of Glik who survived the war (Glik disappeared after being deported to an Estonian death camp following the liquidation of the Vila Ghetto in 1943; he was presumed captured and shot by German forces sometime in 1944 (Gutman 1995)), the song came about in a rush of hope and vigor:

> The survivors in the Warsaw Ghetto have begun an armed resistance against the murders of the Jewish people. The ghetto is aflame!" [flashed over the secret radio waves of the partisan organizations]…Two short lines conveyed the flaming news…We knew of no other particulars yet…but we suddenly saw clearly the flames of the Warsaw ghetto and the Jews fighting with arms for their dignity and self-respect. Restless days. Sleepless nights. We armed ourselves. The news of the uprising lifted our spirits and made us proud…and although we were in agony at their unequal struggle…we felt relieved…our hearts became winged. (Gilbert 2005, 72)

Our hearts became winged. Glik was nineteen years old when he composed *Zog nit Keynmol*—an established and accomplished poet whose lyrics reflect an impossibly short lifetime spent paying attention to beauty, even amongst despair. Kaczerginski continued:

> On the morrow, Hirsh came to my room bright and early. 'Now, listen carefully,' he pleaded, 'I'll sing it for you right away.' He began to sing it softly, but full of excitement. His eyes glowed with little sparks…*Kumen vet noch undzer oysgebenkte sho*…Where did he get his faith? His voice became firmer. He tapped out the rhythm with his foot, as if he were marching…*Dos hot a folk tsevishn falndike vent, dos lid gezungen mit naganes in di hent*…We lived with the spirit of April and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The partisan staff in the Vilna ghetto decided that the song should become the hymn of its fighters. But the people did not wait for this decision, and the song had already spread to the ghettos, the concentration and labor camps, and into the woods to other partisan brigades. (ibid.).

Zog nit keynmol is set to a marching beat; Glick set his poetry to a Soviet melody well known in Eastern Europe and amongst leftist groups at the time, originally featured in a film called *I, Son*

of Working People (Gutman 1995). The melody is appropriately rousing, affective in the way military music is meant to be—assertive, steady, rhythmic. I first heard the song before I had any Yiddish comprehension skills, and was stirred just from tone alone. Reading the lyrics independently of the music is similarly moving. But listening to the song with the ability to understand the meaning of the words as they are sung deepens the experience in a way that is difficult to put into words. *Zog nit keynmol* is the kind of anthem that is stamped onto generations of people's hearts and souls; Norm Berman told me that his mother continued to sing it throughout her struggle with dementia.

> People sang it, and she sang it, and there was such defiance and pride and hope that came with that. You know, she died about 10 years ago, and she had lost a lot of her memory. She had a rare form of dementia in her last years. But one of the things that she remembered was every word and every verse of that song. And when she was uncomfortable in her nursing home, she would begin to sing the song, and the nurses called it 'Bluma's song.' And it was her saying, you know, "I'm not ready to leave yet." (Berman 2020)

Unter dayne vayse shtern ('Under Your White Stars') is another song of the Vilna Ghetto. The lyrics are from beloved Yiddish poet Avraham Sutskeyer, who wrote the poem while he was imprisoned in the Ghetto sometime between 1941 and 1943 (The Telegraph 2010). Sutskeyer survived the war—escaping the Ghetto with his wife in 1943 and joining a partisan unit in the forests near Vilna. *Unter dayne vayse shtern* was set to music by Abraham Brudno, and first performed in the Ghetto itself as part of a play called "Di Yogenish in Fas" ("The Hunt in the Barrel," a pun on "Diogenes in a barrel").[13] The version of the song most widely-known today was arranged by Lazar Weiner, after the war, and it is this arrangement that is sung by *A Besere Velt.* The lyrics are as follows:

[13] Diogenes was a Greek philosopher, reputed to have lived inside of a wine barrel, rejecting societal norms and behaving erratically.

English Translation	**Yiddish Transliteration**
Under Your white stars *Stretch to me Your white hand.* *My words are tears,* *Wanting to rest in Your hand.*	*Unter dayne vayse shtern* *Shtrek tsu mir dayn vayse hant.* *Mayne verter zaynen trern* *Viln ruen in dayn hant.*
See, they twinkle very darkly *In my cellar-beaten view;* *And I have no place* *How to send them back to You.*	*Ze, es tunklt zeyer finkl* *In mayn kelerdikn blik.* *Un ikh hob gornit keyn vinkl* *Zey tsu shenken dir tsurik.*
And I will, dear God, *Confide in you these of mine* *While in me a fire grows* *And on fire are my days.*	*Un ikh vil dokh, got getrayer* *Dir fartroyen mayn farmeg.* *Vayl es mont in mir a fayer* *Un in fayer-mayne teg.*
But in cellars and holes *Cries the murderous quiet* *I fly higher, over rooftops* *And I search: Where are You? Where?*	*Nor in kelern un lekher* *Veynt di merderishe ru.* *Loyf ikh hekher, ibqer dekher* *Un ikh zukh: vu bistu, vu?*
Something strange hunts me *Stairs and courtyards are on chase* *I hang as a broken bow-string* *And I sing to You this way:*	*Nemen yogn mikh meshune* *Trep un hoyfin mit gevoy.* *Heng ikh a geplaste strune* *Un ikh zing tsu dir azoy:*
Under Your white stars *Stretch to me Your white hand.* *My words are tears,* *Wanting to rest in Your hand.*	*Unter dayne vayse shtern* *Shtrek tsu mir dayn vayse hant.* *Mayne verter zaynen trern* *Viln ruen in dayn hant.*

In contrast to *Zog nit Keynmol*, *Unter dayne vayse shtern* explicitly references a divine being—the God of the Jewish people, a seemingly silent observer during the chaos and horror of the Holocaust. The line "*But in cellars and holes/ Cries the murderous quiet/ I fly higher, over rooftops/And I search: Where are You? Where?*" underscores the sense of abandonment felt by Jews experiencing and witnessing ghettoization, forced labor, displacement, and mass murder; Sutskeyer contrasts this sense of abandonment with reference to "a fire" growing within him. Taken in context with the real-life trajectory Sutskeyer's life took—joining partisan forces and

fighting Nazi oppressors until the liberation of Europe—one can understand *Unter dayne vayse shtern* as a partisan song by association. Though it does not specifically invoke the actions of partisan groups, the song has lived on beyond the war firmly situated in the canon of Holocaust resistance music.

Another song in *A Besere Velt*'s rotation, *Hulyet Hulyet Beyze Vitn* (translated variably as 'Revel, revel, evil winds' or 'Frolic, frolic, evil winds,' etc.), was written many years prior to the Holocaust—but was adopted by many ghetto prisoners in Vilna with "fresh meaning and potency" (Gilbert 2005, 97). (Partisan and ghetto music extends beyond those written by partisans or that explicitly mention partisan efforts to include all those Yiddish songs which held a special meaning in the context of the partisan struggle). The lyrics come from a poem written in 1901 entitled *A vinter lid* ('A Winter Song') by Yiddish writer Avrom Reyzen. The words are believed to have been set to music by Mikhl Gelbart—a Yiddish composer who emigrated to the United States in 1912 and became intimately involved with the first *Arbeter Ring* in New York City (Gilbert 2005, 97). It depicts a bleak landscape, in which violent winds destroy homes and extinguish light. The wind is anthropomorphic; the audience understands the wind to have a mind of its own, desiring to sow discontent and cause chaos with specifically evil intent.

A Besere Velt's arrangement of the lyrics, in English and in Yiddish, are as follows:

English Translation	**Yiddish Transliteration**
Revel, revel, evil winds *Rule the world freely* *Break the branches, throw the trees* *Do what you please*	*Hulyet, hulyet beyze vintn* *Fray bahersht di velt* *Brekht di tsvaygn, varft di beymer* *Tut vos aykh gefelt*
Tear the shutters from the houses *Windowpanes break out* *Burns a candle somewhere dark* *Extinguish with fury out*	*Rayst di lodn fun di hayzlekh* *Shoybn brekht aroys* *Brent a likhtl ergets tunkl* *Lesht mit tsorn oys*

Revel, revel, evil winds	*Hulyet hulyet beyze vintn*
Now is your time	*Itst iz ayer tsayt*
Long will not last the winter	*Lang vet nisht doyern der vinter*
Summer is not far	*Zumer is nisht vayt*

As part of *A Besere Velt*'s songbook, the following additional lyrics are provided in full, below the abbreviated and adapted lyrics above:

> Revel, revel, evil winds. Rule the world freely. Break the branches, hurl the trees, do whatever you please. Drive the birds from the fields and chase them away. Those who can't fly, kill them on the spot. Tear the shutters from the houses, smash the windows. If a candle burns in the darkness somewhere, put it out with fury. Revel, revel, evil winds. Now your time has come. Winter will NOT last long. Summer is NOT far off. (A Besere Velt, n.d.)

In Reyzen's original poem, the final lines end on a note of despair: "Winter will last a long time/Summer is still far off" (ORT n.d.). But in the Vilna Ghetto—and in Boston, as performed by *A Besere Velt*—the lyrics look toward a future beyond sorrow. The addition of just two words transforms the song from melancholic to hopeful, from overwhelmed to defiant.

Es Brent ('It's Burning'; also known as *Undzer Shtetl Brent*, 'Our Town is Burning') was composed in 1938 by Mordkhe (Mordecai) Gebirtig, a Yiddish poet who was popular across Yiddish Europe in the lead-up to World War II (Bush 2014). *Es Brent* was composed after a *pogrom* in the Polish city of Przytyk in 1938, but the themes explored in the song were both depressingly well-tread and chillingly prescient (Adolphe 2000).[14] *A Besere Velt*'s arrangement of the lyrics are as follows:

English Translation	**Yiddish Transliteration**
It is burning, brothers, it is burning.	*Es brent, briderlekh, es brent.*
Our poor little town, a pity, burns!	*Undzer orem shtetl, nebekh, brent!*
Furious winds blow,	*Beyze vintn irgazon,*
Breaking, burning and scattering,	*Brekhn, brenen un tseblozn,*

[14] A *pogrom* refers to a violent, often well-organized mob attack on Jewish communities, usually in Eastern Europe.

And you stand around	*Un ir shteyt un kukt,*
With folded arms.	*Azoy zikh, mit farleygte hent.*
O, you stand and look	*Oy, ir shteyt un kukt*
While our town burns.	*Azoy zikh, vi undzer shtetl brent.*
It is burning, brothers, it is burning	*Es brent, briderlekh, es brent.*
Our poor little town, a pity, burns~	*Undzer orem shtetl, nebekh, brent!*
The tongues of fire have already	*Es hobn shoyn di fayertsungen*
Swallowed the entire town.	*Dos gantse shtetl ayngeshlungen.*
Everything surrounding it is burning,	*Alts arum shoyn brent,*
And you stand around	*Un ir shteyt un kukt*
While our town burns.	*Azoy zikh, vi undzer shtetl brent.*
It is burning, brothers, it is burning!	*Es brent, briderlekh, es brent!!*
You are the only source of help.	*Di hilf iz nor in aykh gevent,*
If you value your town,	*Az dos shtetl iz aykh tayer,*
Take up the tools to put out the fire,	*Nemt di keylim, lesht dos fayer,*
Put out the fire with your own blood.	*Lesht dos fayer mit eygn blut,*
Don't just stand there, brothers,	*Shteyt nit brider*
with your arms folded.	*Ot azoy zikh mit farleygte hent.*
Don't just stand there, brothers,	*Shtetyt nit brider*
Put out the fire, because our town is burning.	*Lesht dos fayer, vayl undzer shtetl brent.*

As previously mentioned by Linda Gritz, *A Besere Velt* typically sings *Es Brent* as part of Holocaust-specific programming, to provide greater context for the disaster in Europe. *Es Brent* underscores, most importantly, the fear of extermination present in Jewish people's lives prior to the Holocaust. Reading the lyrics post-Holocaust is devasting.

Yugnt Himen, 'Youth Hymn' is another popular Vilna composition. Written by Shmerke Kaczerginski, a poet and later a partisan, the composition was dedicated to the youth club in the ghetto, where it was performed at meetings and gatherings within the ghetto. The melody was composed by fellow inmate Basye Rubin. The song mirrors the many "official" partisan songs composed by Vilna songwriters—the tempo is upbeat, and the lyrics are brash, proud, and encouraging:

English Translation	**Yiddish Transliteration**
Our song is full of sorrow, *Yet our marching step is strong.* *Though the foe blots out tomorrow,* *Young folks answer: with a song!*	*Undzer li iz ful mit troyer, –* *Dreyst iz undzer munter-gang,* *Khotsh der soyne vakht baym toyer, –* *Shturemt yugnt mit gezang: TSUZING*
Young is everyone who truly, truly wills so: *Years can't stop the upward climb.* *Even older folks are happy children, also,* *In a better, freer time!*	*Yung iz yeder, yeder, yeder ver es vil nor,* *Yorn hobn keyn batayt,* *Alte oyb zey viln kenen oykh zayn kinder* *Fun a nayer, frayer tsayt.*
Those who wander off the highways, *They who march with spirits bright:* *From the ghetto and its byways,* *Youth salutes them through the night. Young is everyone…*	*Ver es voglt um oyf vegn,* *Ver mit dreystkeyt s'shtelt zayn fus,* *Brengt di yugnt zey antkegn* *Funem geto a gerus. Yung iz yeder…*
We remember all our foemen, *We recall our truest friends.* *Darkness past is not an omen:* *A brighter future now portends. Young is everyone…*	*Mir gedenken ale sonim,* *Mir gedenken ale fraynt,* *Eybik veln mit dermonen,* *Undzer nekhtn mitn haynt. Yung iz yeder…*
Gather up the shards remaining, *Form our marching ranks in throngs:* *Workers building, smiths creating—* *Let us, young folks, march along! Young is everyone…*	*Klaybn mir tsunoyf di glider,* *Vider shteln oyf di rey.* *Geyt a boyer, geyt a shmider –* *Lomir, ale, geyn mit zey. Yung iz yeder…*

Lyrics such as "A brighter future now portends," and "Our song is full of sorrow/ Yet our marching step is strong" set the tone: defiance, led by the young. Linda Gritz, when asked what kind of Jewish future she imagines, referenced *Yugnt Himen* explicitly:

> As I said, our daughter was the first kid who stayed in the chorus. But my guess is that with my son, we had about 10 kids in the chorus. And we would have them sing "Yugnt Himen"…. That's not a partisan song, but it was written by someone who became a part of the resistance. It certainly is a resistance song. And when we had 10 kids singing those verses, I could barely sing the chorus…. It was just, ah…I feel pride thinking about the continuity. From generation to generation and the meaning, there's just such rich meanings in the songs. (Katz & Gritz, 2020)

It is clear by discussion of tone, lyrics, and context that partisan and partisan-adjacent ghetto songs are, first and foremost, calls to action—for the people who originally sang and heard them, certainly, but also for generations yet to be born. Sonya Taaffe provided a crucial and moving anecdote, when asked to think about the relevance of singing and performing partisan music for a modern audience:

> It's [the story] where, you know, in times of great danger, the Baal Shem Tov would go to a particular place in the forest and he would light a certain kind of fire and he would say a particular prayer. And the crisis would be averted. What needed to be done would be done and everything would be all right. And then time went on and the Baal Shem Tov died. And the knowledge of the of the particular prayer was forgotten, but new catastrophe threatened. And his successor went to the place in the forest and built the fire the way he was supposed to. And it was enough. Crisis was averted. What needed to be done was done. Everything was all right. Time goes on. The knowledge of how to build the fire is lost. What's left is the place in the forest. Catastrophe threatens. The successor of the Baal Shem Tov—another—goes to the place in the forest and knowing the place in the forest is enough and what needs to be done is done. Crisis averted. Everybody is saved. And now here we are in the modern world where no one knows where the place in the forest is and no one knows how to build a fire and no one knows the words of the prayer. And all we have left is the story. And all we can do is tell the story. And telling the story has to be enough.
>
> That has been important to me for a number of years. And this year, in 2020, given the limitations on everything that we can do, it feels even more important. If all we can do is tell the story, then the story has to be enough. And I think that does link up a lot with Jewish practice in my own life, which is fairly, incredibly secular. I wasn't raised to keep kosher. I wasn't raised to keep Shabbat or anything like that. And what we had were significant festivals which were celebrated with my grandparents and a certain amount of ritual on my own time, which is meaningful, although, of course, Judaism is incredibly communal.
>
> So everything really does feel like it's come down to the story of the place in the forest and the fire and the prayer and the fact that nobody can do any of the rest of it. The fact that we're all talking over Zoom has to be enough. But I do think that some component of that carries over into the way that I feel about Yiddish music because, yes, the world that all of these songs came out of is gone. It's gone in the ordinary way that time passes and things don't come back and you can't turn back time no matter how much nostalgia you pour into it: what you have is where you live and when you live now and you have to reckon with that. And it's also gone in the way of having had a genocide, which rather accelerated the ordinary processes of time. And so what we really are left with is the story and not the place in the forest and not the fire and not the prayer, because all of

> that's been gone for a very long time, but that doesn't mean that there's no point in singing the music. It's still important to sing the music.
>
> I think Zog nit Keynmol persists for a lot of reasons. Its recurring phrase is: *mir zaynen do*. We are here. And that is an incredibly powerful assertion. And also a thing to hold on to. (Taaffe 2020)

A Besere Velt's catalog does many things at once: interpretation, re-interpretation, faithful re-creation, modern adaptation. It preserves, it imagines, it commands, and it responds—all thanks to the imagination and commitment of its members, and the relationship each of them bring individually to Jewish identity, group affiliation, and the legacy of those who fought back. If there is a sentiment that can sum up the whole of diverse beliefs about singing partisan and ghetto music as Jews in the twenty-first century, it is this: *mir zaynen do*.

CHAPTER TWO

The Creation of New Jewish Tradition

Broadly speaking, the study of folklore examines the notions of and practices rooted in tradition. "Folklore is the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example," the American Folklore Society (n.d.) writes. "Every group with a sense of its own identity shares, as a central part of that identity, folk traditions–the things that people traditionally believe (planting practices, family traditions, and other elements of worldview), do (dance, make music, sew clothing), know (how to build an irrigation dam, how to nurse an ailment, how to prepare barbecue), make (architecture, art, craft), and say (personal experience stories, riddles, song lyrics)" (ibid.) As such, *Jewish* folklore, in particular, encompasses Jewish practice and tradition in both cultural and religious realms of experience. While plenty of folk tales, songs, beliefs, and recipes are grounded in the common religious texts of the Jewish faith, equally as important to the broader Jewish folk canon are the recipes passed down from parent to child, legends of the *dybbuk*, colorful curses, jokes, clippings from radical newspapers printed in Yiddish, and Coen Brothers films.

"What is it that has made the Jewish people, scattered all over the world for 2,000 years, one people despite the lack of a homeland for most of that time?" Steven M. Lowenstein writes in *The Jewish Cultural Tapestry*. "The answer… is tradition" (Lowenstein 2002, 2). In both the stage play and film adaptations of *Fiddler on the Roof*, major tension is built on the idea of *tradition* as something immutable to Jews; the lead, Tevye, is torn interpersonally and politically

as his daughters contemplate abandoning tradition to marry for love and the Russian Empire narrows in on expelling the Jews from their village once and for all. For Tevye, tradition is a script from which deviance could spell the end of their entire way of life. But virtually every (modern) folklorist would agree that tradition does not have to be rote and unchangeable. Tradition is not only founded upon but indeed sustained by both innovation and repetition. Even the most orthodox of Jewish religious adherence is not so rigid as to avoid any updates or evolutions; one needs only to walk through Crown Heights in New York City, a neighborhood with a large Hasidic presence, and observe the hanging *eruvs*—thin wires encircling neighborhood blocks like telephone wires that allow families to claim the encircled outdoor space as "private" and thus adhere to Sabbath rules with modern adaptations. Regardless of what end of the spectrum of observance a Jewish person falls—from the most orthodox to the strictly secular—tradition, most importantly deals with *dynamic* continuity. Barre Toelken, in the *Dynamics of Folklore*, writes:

> Tradition [means] not some static, immutable force from the past, but those pre-existing culture-specific materials and options that bear upon the performer more heavily than do his or her own personal tastes and talents. We recognize in the use of *tradition* that such matters as content and style have been for the most part passed on but not invented by the performer.
>
> *Dynamic* recognizes, on the other hand, that in the processing of these contents and styles in performance, the artist's own unique talents of inventiveness *within* the tradition are highly valued and are expected to operate strongly. (Toelken 1979, 32)

Each and every Jewish person expresses their Jewishness in a way that is unique to them. Even operating from the same script—be it sheet music used by members of *A Besere Velt*, the Torah at Saturday services, or a *siddur*—guarantees subtle variations in execution; it is not humanly possible to produce perfectly synchronous sound while singing as a group, nor to read from the Torah with the exact same inflection and pitch and breath every single time, nor move through the

prayers in a *siddur* at precisely the same speed each week.[15] For members of *A Besere Velt*, the nature of the group achieves harmony through individual expression: as a chorus, there are defined, unique roles for singers of varying voice roles (alto, soprano, etc.). When *A Besere Velt* performs *Zog nit keynmol*, they produce a coherent expression of Jewish resistance, assembled from the voices of dozens and dozens unique Jewish individuals, who produce sound with minute variations from moment to moment.

Earlier in this paper, Mike Katz and Linda Gritz spoke of their approach to tradition, ritual, and observance:

> [MK] In order to stay Jewish, and we clearly have made a decision to stay Jewish, we are not assimilated…in order to stay Jewish without having to be a member of the synagogue, being a "card carrying" Jew, it was a choice we made. You have to think a lot, and consciously make choices about what parts you accept and what parts you don't accept, and what parts you use and what parts you don't use… (Katz & Gritz 2020)

There are several important insights we can glean from both Katz and Gritz's explanations of how they engage with Judaism and live Jewish lives. The chief among them relates to Katz's framework of *choice*. Jewish tradition—and, indeed, all tradition—is not, contrary to Tevye the Dairyman's Broadway laments, something that exists outside of time and space. Jewish people have long grappled with the degree to which their lives ought to be dictated by Jewish texts and community heritage; the Reform movement in Judaism grew explicitly from German rabbi Abraham Geiger arguing that individual choice with regards to engagement with *mitzvot* (while upholding what he considered to be "eternal rational truths") would ensure the preservation and continuation of Jews as modern members of society.[16] Even the story taken as strictly true by

[15] A *siddur* is a Jewish prayer book, frequently employed in synagogue services.

[16] "Commandment" or "obligation"—these are actions and prohibitions stemming from the Torah and Talmudic interpretation that outline what a Jewish person is expected to do. In a colloquial sense, *mitzvot* are often taken to refer to good deeds—i.e, "it is a mitzvah to do x."

orthodox Jews that says the Torah was literally handed down at Mount Sinai by God to Moses requires the decision to accept the Torah as law *and* the continued decision to uphold, honor, and engage with those laws. Within tradition, there are choices—ones that are often made over and over and over again, by a great number of people—but choices nonetheless. And perhaps most crucially, this choice includes the creativity in *how* traditions are carried out or performed. There is not a perfect balance between individual and communal choice—that is, what traditions are practiced and upheld by individuals who identity as Jewish versus the Jewish people, broadly defined. There is no centralized authority in Jewish tradition; even the Torah has been debated, interpreted, and reinterpreted throughout the ages. Jewish affiliation (by birth or by choice) entitles adherents to the claim of their expressions of tradition being Jewish, whether or not they mirror common or widespread practice. Friday-night meals can be Shabbat meals without the ingredients being kosher; a *Haggadah* can tell a version of the Exodus devoid of divine intervention.[17]

In this vein, Gritz's note of the fact that ritual within *A Besere Velt* and the Worker's Circle more broadly is not performed "without thought" provides insight into the ways in which many secular Jews understand religiously motivated adherences. Katz and Gritz are drawing a line between acceptance of traditions *for tradition's sake* and practices that are actively sought out because they speak to values and ideas held dear by the participants. In this way, they are treating tradition as an active, rather than passive, component of Jewish life.

The Creation of New Jewish Ritual

Ritual (itself often an expression of tradition) is similarly a phenomenon that requires active choice. In the case of *A Besere Velt,* both the singing itself—members choosing to become

[17] A *Haggadah* is a text that guides participants through the Passover Seder (ritual meal).

involved with the chorus, attending practices, producing sound from theirs throats, etc.—and the crafting of *A Besere Velt*'s repertoire—crafted over time, with input from both the musical directors and members of the chorus—constitute rituals of various kinds. According to Roy A. Rappaport, ritual "may be defined as the performance of more less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers. Many would argue that ritual is not simply one of many modes of communication available to humans but the one that has made other sorts of human communication possible, particularly those resting on language" (Rappaport 1992, 249-250). He adds:

> Although popular understanding tends to associate ritual with the concerns or practice of religion, a fundamental aspect of the definition offered here is that it does not stipulate ritual's subject matter. Ritual is understood to be a form or structure, that is, a number of features or characteristics in a more or less fixed relationship to one another. (ibid.)

Ritual, then, can be understood most simply as repetitive action (or actions) performed with intent; Jewish rituals are acts of communication that are performed both *by* Jewish people, and with Jewish intent. Norm Berman described his relationship to Jewishness and ritual within *A Besere Velt* thusly:

> You know, it's being part of an idea, a tradition, a ritual. Going way back, we're part of a tribe that held certain beliefs and did certain practices and said these are meaningful to us for these reasons. And the reasons were often reasons that I could relate to. You know, we do self-reflection at the high holidays because it makes us better people. It makes us empathic…and a lot of it has to do with humanity. There's a Jewish way of doing it, right? We try to make sense of our humanity. We try to make sense of our time on earth. And we inform it through what? Through culture. Through poetry. Through art. Through storytelling. Through music and singing. It's a way of being. It's a way of seeing the world. There's a religious overlay which says, you know, it all started at Sinai. And we ended up with the Torah. And there are all the traditions that flowed from that…and I think we are informed about what it means to be a minority. We're informed about what it means to be, you know, discriminated against. So, I think when we experience those things, among other cultures, among other people, there's an empathy there. (Berman 2020)

Berman's mention of having to *personally* find Jewish beliefs and practices meaningful is particularly telling. It seems like an obvious point—of course we find the beliefs we espouse and rituals we engage with meaningful and compelling. But this underscores the earlier point about the role of choice in categorizing some practices as tradition**.** Berman and other members of *A Besere Velt* are active participants in their Jewish identity not only by birth or by happenstance, but because the traditions of those who came before feel to them inherently worth carrying on. Rebecca Long, similarly reflecting on her active decisions to find a way to connect with Judaism and Jewish identity in a way that felt emotionally satisfying and true to her own morals, said:

> So, 2016, also the year that Trump was elected. And I was like, "OK, I need to find some Jewish community." I grew up going to a Conservative synagogue. I went to Camp Ramah, which is affiliated with the Conservative movement. I went to Jewish high school and then I went to a really small Pennsylvania liberal arts college where there were no Jews, basically. So, I really felt like, "OK, it's time for me to get back into it," but when I moved here as an adult, my politics were different. My views about Judaism were different. And I thought, joining a synagogue is not quite what feels like the fit for me anymore. So, I was looking around, and I actually planned on taking Yiddish courses at the Workers' Circle. And I felt like the choir was such a good way to, like, tap into the *real* part of my Jewish history, which is Yiddish and not Hebrew, which is a language that I studied in Hebrew school, that I spoke at camp, that I learned in high school. And I just felt like, "OK, let's do something that my grandma would be familiar with." And I, of course, liked the values espoused at this choir were ones that I also valued… I was talking to Judith, who's actually my section leader; I'm a soprano. And she was asking me these questions—"why are you interested in this? Why are you here?
> And I was like, "well, I want to find like a left Jewish space." And she said, "well, if you're looking for a *liberal* space, you should go to the reform synagogue next door. But if you're looking for a *socialist* space, this is it." (Long 2020)

Many members of *A Besere Velt* identified political relationships to and with Yiddish as a motivation to engage with the chorus—a means of enacting and espousing their values and engaging with tradition and ritual in a way that felt "true" to their political compass. Norm Berman, when asked what political associations Yiddish brought to mind for him, said:

> I think given the Jewish experience in general, I think the art of the expression went straight to our striving for something better, which is, I think by definition, progressive. And, you know, perhaps radical…it reflects the thinking of many of the creative people

> who tapped into what the culture at the time was feeling and lent expression to that. So, I think politically radical, surely progressive, feeling hopeful. And, you know, in today's terms, probably democratic. (Berman 2020)

Derek David, *A Besere Velt*'s current musical director, said:

> I know that for a lot of people in the chorus it's very much an affirmation of their history, identity, and their values. In other words, what we do is very much so a declaration of what we believe. It is both a representation of our personal history and a way of expressing leftism and Jewishness in the same breath. For me personally, I also see what we do as taking part in a historical act, as we recreate the past to sing for a more just and equative world, and to sing for voices that have been silenced or suppressed in our world today.
>
> For example, when we sing "Zog nit keynmol" (a hymn of resilience inspired by the Warsaw ghetto uprising), I feel that it has far more to do with the past than it does have to do with the present, mainly because we aren't living anywhere near the same material conditions in which the Jews of Eastern Europe lived. What we're mainly wrestling with is our contemporary political landscape through the past. We sing in support of the world we want to live in, and our allyship to those who need us through our own shared history. (David 2020)

David's perception of how *A Besere Velt's* members may understand their politics in relation to and in conversation with Yiddish music provides a valuable lens. His mention of "discovery, rediscovery, honoring the past and potentially keeping it alive" underscore the same general sentiment that all the chorus members I interviewed expressed: that there is something worth preserving in the words and melodies of Yiddish music—whether they are sung in memoriam, in hopefulness, or just for the present. As I closed our interview, I pressed David to summarize his thoughts on *A Besere Velt*'s repertoire and the relevance of Jewish partisans in the twenty-first century (and the year 2020 more specifically):

> [JOS] I will ask: what is the relevance of the music of Jewish partisans in 2020? And I know, of course, we've kind of come at this a little bit as you kind of understand it as a historical project. But if there's anything more you wanted to add to that, please do.
>
> [DD] Sure—what I would say is the Jewish partisan repertoire is not the only thing we do. Part of the reason why I'm here—my goal, my mission—is really to promote historical and contemporaneous Yiddish music, as well as add to the tradition through my own arrangements and compositions. I'm here not only in support of the left-wing ethos

> of the group (which I am proudly a believer in) but also on the personal artistic mission of promoting art that has been lost and creating art that has yet to be born. In my eyes, I try to provide formal arrangements of folksongs, in addition to folk arrangements, in efforts to celebrate and honor the Yiddish musical world which has been so cut down. (David 2020)

As discussed previously, radicalism is not *inherent* to Judaism nor the Yiddish language—but as Katz eloquently notes, the music of ghettos and Jewish partisans *A Besere Velt* performs showcase radical Jews who were writing about their circumstances, their experiences, their politics, and their dreams:

> For us, and this gets much more philosophical, but part of the reason Yiddish is important to us is as people….you may notice neither one of us said we went to Hebrew school. The traditional religion is not part of either of our families. I'm at least a third generation secularist. And how do you keep a culture alive? To me, it's Yiddish and *Yiddishkeit*. To me, it's indivisibly connected to progressivism, to being a progressive. You know, Yiddish was the language of the women. Yiddish was the language of social protest in Europe. It was the language that created the unions in America. So, yes, I choose what I use, and I ignore other things that Yiddish is involved with. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Their mode of expression—songwriting and singing—was both a nod to a broader folk tradition of transmitting information, history, and emotion through music, and also a vehicle to express their Jewish identity, worldview, and pride. For the members of *A Besere Velt* who share the same political outlooks and desire for justice, performing the music of Jewish partisans and ghetto music becomes a ritual that is part of an evolving Jewish tradition.

Performance, Meaning, and the Creation of Jewish Space

Central to the ways in which people creatively engage with evolving traditions is understanding the world of performance, both through folkloristic and cultural lenses. Rappaport says:

> A second feature noted in the definition [of ritual] is performance. If there is no performance, there is no ritual; performance itself is an aspect of that which is performed. The medium is part of the message; more precisely, it is a meta-message about whatever is encoded in the ritual. Third, the definition stipulates that the sequences of formal acts

> and utterances constituting ritual are not absolutely invariant but only more or less so. This stipulation not only allows for imperfection in performance but also recognizes that some variation will likely be present within any liturgical order (ritual) no matter how punctilious its performance must be. (Rappaport 1992, 249-250)

According to this Rappaport, performance is both an indivisible component of ritual, and, by its nature, dynamic—a definition that evokes Toelken's observation of folkloric traditions, more broadly: "Folklore is made up of informal expressions passed around long enough to have become recurrent in form and context, but changeable in performance" (Toelken 1979, 32).

Rappaport continues:

> A ritual is an order of *acts* and *utterances* and as such is enlivened or realized only when those acts are performed and those utterances voiced. This relationship of the act of performance to that which is being performed—that it brings it into being or realizes it or makes it real—cannot help but specify as well the relationship of the performers to that which they are performing. They are not merely transmitting messages they find encoded in the canon. They are participating in—that is, becoming part of—the order to which their own bodies and breath give life. (Rappaport 1992, 250)

This idea of *becoming* through performance is particularly salient: *A Besere Velt* is not just sharing the music of partisan and ghetto resisters with an audience, but also with themselves. In this sense, each performance is an act of creation—of memory, and of space.

On the topic of space, Joachim Schlör, introducing the edited volume *Jewish and Non-Jewish Spaces in Urban Context*, writes:

> All human existence, as Amir Eshel has put it, is "fundamentally connected to and manifested in space." In the context of Jewish history and culture, this connection contains an additional dialectical tension: "between cosmos and *makom* [Hebrew: place], between the places of the material world, manifest in houses, streets, markets, synagogues, and those of the spiritual heritage, in texts, prayers, images, or memories. Life conditions in the Diaspora – among the nations – have brought about a specific poetics of space as a result of this in-between-ness and of the physical and mental confrontation between these two worlds.
>
> Jewish topographies emerge from and can be discussed in the framework of such – cultural activities: to inhabit, to imagine, to depict, to give meaning to, to transgress. To

> be in a place. (Schlör 2015, 9)

A Besere Velt revels in the "in-between-ness"—liminal space as described by both Victor Turner and chorus members themselves. Turner's famous conception of liminal space—that is, to be "betwixt and between"—is relevant here:

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (Turner, 1974)

What does *A Besere Velt* communicate and create in the space created through performance—both in rehearsals, practicing solo as individuals, standing in front of a crowd, or taping music for a Zoom-assisted concert? Norm Berman described what happens in the room when *A Besere Velt* sings:

> But in performance, there are those moments when you suddenly feel, 'Oh, my God. We've made this connection.' We've succeeded in creating this space. And it's not that we are suddenly in the camp or in the words or in the shtetl. But we're in that that *emotional* space, where we can connect with what our ancestors experienced and we can actually bring that experience to other to ourselves, but also to the people who are listening to us…. I think with a good performance, especially when, you know, the harmonies work and the timing is working and you're really paying attention to the conductor…. you just you walk into it, and it happens. And I've been told by members of audience –'oh, my God, in this particular song at this particular moment, something happened.' (Berman 2020)

Here, *A Besere Velt* succeeds in creating the most ordinary and extraordinary of places: liminal space. The boundaries of time get a little fuzzy—it's not quite time travel, but almost a way to "zoom out," to see Jewish experiences on a long continuum, with no real beginning or end. Edith Turner, writing on collective joy, summarized music's possibilities for the creation of liminal space by saying:

> Music is no ordinary aspect of human experience. Our bodies have boundaries—skins—so we cannot merge all of our body with all of the others. But by intimately sharing

> precise time, owing to the transformative power of rhythm, we can merge, and we find we are not separate. In music, you join your voices completely, you are joined, you are in the same place, because you have gone altogether into the sound, and the sound is one sound with all the other people in it: on, in the same space. (Turner 2012, 48)

There is undoubtedly a role that an audience plays for a performance. It is certainly true that there is not a set number of participants in an endeavor required to beget *space* as an act of community creation and resistance, but in the case of *A Besere Velt*, the presence of an audience during performances ensures that the ritual is being witnessed—that is, people watching the performance of Jewish partisan and ghetto music begets certainty that important themes and messages are being transmitted. Rappaport argues:

> Participation suggests something more binding than whatever is connoted by terms like authority and conformity. Communication entails transmitters, receivers, and messages, but in ritual performances transmitters are always among the most important receivers of their own messages; there is a partial fusion of transmitter and receiver. A further fusion that occurs during ritual is that the transmitter-receiver becomes one with the message being transmitted and received. In conforming to the order that comes alive in performance, the performer becomes a part of it for the time being. Because this is the case, for performers to reject whatever is encoded in the canons that they are performing while they are performing them seems to me to be a contradiction in terms, and thus impossible. This is to say that by performing a ritual the performers accept, and indicate to themselves and others that they accept, whatever is encoded in the canons of the liturgical order that they are performing. This message of acceptance is the indexical message--or metamessage intrinsic to all ritual, the message without which canonical messages are devoid of force. It is not a trivial message, because humans have the choice, at least logically, of participating or not. (Rappaport 1992, 250)

In this way, too, other members of *A Besere Velt* are they themselves a kind of audience. It is this transmission—both internally, within *A Besere Velt*, and externally, with "outside" audiences of any size and makeup—that sustains and defines *A Besere Velt's* tradition.

To this point, Sonya Taaffe said:

> Partisan songs right now do have a particular resonance to me. And singing them feels like an act of tribute to the people who wrote to them and sang them the first time and who, for one reason or another, are generally now no longer alive. I met last year a woman who was a child survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, which was very interesting. And then at the end of the week, my mother met a woman who has a child who survived the

> firebombing of Dresden. And that was that was definitely a week for living, living memory, historical memory. Partisan music does actually feel like a living act of resistance. It doesn't just feel like paying tribute to something in the past that is safely dead and gone and we can look back on them and go, oh, that's wonderful, you know, we don't have to worry about it nowadays. For me, it does feel like the phrase I would use, which is partly gotten out of a book like many things in my life—I don't like the phrase 'keeping faith' because that isn't particularly how I think about it, it's keeping *continuity*. It does feel like it's part of a tradition, and that I'm singing it in a context where it isn't safely dead. Also feels partly like some act of self-assertion. It's not interchangeable for me with singing in Italian or German or Czech or Greek or English, which are all other languages that I've sung in. It does feel important to me to carry it forward... I don't know if I would classify it as strongly as an obligation, because that sounds like somebody dropped it on me but I didn't want it, and I suspect it's more like I went looking for it. But there is a sense of continuity that is significant to me about that music. (Taaffe, 2020)

Taaffe's conception of partisan and ghetto music as existing in a "context where it isn't safely dead" is striking on two levels: one, it considers that many Jews feel connected to ghetto and partisan music because Jewish people continue to face antisemitism, alienation, fear, and a desire for a justice; and two, that in singing the music, members of *A Besere Velt* prevent the music from "dying," that is, being lost to history. Here, too, Taaffe speaks to the idea of choice in tradition. She describes singing in Yiddish as an avenue through which her Jewishness is affirmed and asserted, while simultaneously acknowledging the weight of personal ancestral and broader community obligation and history.

Michael Felsen said:

> I am very, very moved by the music that we sing. Maybe not every single song. But a lot of it is a very emotional experience…We've done, as you've probably heard, performances that are thematic. We've sung music of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising or like, you know, bread and roses/striking/labor music…I get extremely emotional singing that stuff. I think the music is quite beautiful, I think the melodies are quite beautiful…It feels like a direct connection, an emotional connection… not just an intellectual connection. And we're a community of… kindred spirits, we're have this common sense of needing to confront injustice. So it all kind of melds together into something that is very satisfying and very meaningful and very uniting… It's funny, because I've heard the term liminal space, but I actually never knew exactly what it meant. In thinking about some of our performances, it's a transporting experience. It transcends the moment you're in daily moment, it takes you to another space. It's beautiful. (Felsen 2020)

Felsen articulates a relationship between the history of both the music *A Besere Velt* sings and the history of the Jewish people more broadly—while experiencing a transformation and creation of a "third" space inhabited by the members of the chorus. Likewise, Bob Follansbee mentioned:

> You know, when I'm singing some of the songs, because I don't speak Yiddish, I'm not always completely aware of what I'm saying. We do a pretty good job of reviewing lyrics and what they mean, but on word-by-word basis, I don't always know what every single line means.
>
> *But* my headspace is definitely…Well it's interesting. I would say that in some ways, while I do have some of the harking back to the past or kind of honoring the past, what I'm emotive about is doing this in the present. The fact that we're in this particular time, singing this music. And once again, the fact that it's Yiddish music, and what that means, as a way to honor the music itself, not just the words. But then also honoring what the words mean, and they resonate obviously in different ways to things in the past verses the future. But I just have this sense of—wow, this is pretty cool that we're doing this right now. (Follansbee 2020)

Follansbee sees a connection between the past and the present in *A Besere Velt* performances, but approaches that connection primarily from a place of reverence and excitement that the music is being performed in the present to begin with.

A Besere Velt's liminal spaces in performance are not just grounded in remembrance of the past and creation of a Jewish present, but also in the promise of a Jewish future. For Linda Gritz, this promise is made most visible by the involvement of young children:

> I cry, especially when the kids sing….It's expressing my heritage, my ethnic identity, my aspirations for a better world. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Lily Weitzman, a younger member of the chorus, mused:

> I think there is an aspect of it, for me, that is about connecting to the past while simultaneously being in the present and looking forward…I think I'm fairly anti-nostalgia, both because we can paint an inaccurate picture of the past, but also….I don't know if I'm seeing this, partly because I didn't grow up with family members literally singing this music or speaking Yiddish, it's not like, oh, I remember my grandmother telling me this song….But I think it's more of a broader cultural connection to look to our community that has been in this fight for a long time. It's important to know where you came from so that you can move forward….Even though I think there can be a danger to

> certain kind of mythologizing among our own community, it's important that we continue to study and learn more about it. (Weitzman 2020)

Similarly, Rebecca Long said:

> There is an eerie familiarity about Yiddish. It feels like mine. And so I think in deepening my understanding of Yiddishkeit by singing, that I have found meaning, and have also gained understanding of things I never would have expected Yiddish to apply to… it's cool to understand just how modern this language is in so many ways. Like how applicable it is….how I can imagine a world in which the Holocaust never happened and people were still speaking Yiddish in huge numbers. I'm in this choir with mostly 60 plus year olds and to learn from them and sing with them feels very meaningful. And part of that is just like the familial feeling that I was describing before. And there is a sense that in the time that I've been in the choir, more and more young people have joined it. Like me and my roommate were like two of maybe four young people initially. And we have a big choir, of almost 60 people. And now there's like ten of us younger folks. And so just to see the younger people….there's a hope that I feel that, you know, when this generation is no longer here, this fire still exists. And I am feeling more and more like, yes, there are people who will want to continue doing this. I mean, there's so much wrapped up in like…this feeling of it being my duty to preserve, like Jewish culture, right? And this feeling that I think we always have, like we're on the brink of destruction at any moment. It's like I feel like I'm doing more building, loving this community of older folks who are radical. (Long 2020)

Both Weitzman and Long are several generations removed from the direct trauma of the Holocaust, and are careful to avoid idealizing Yiddish, Yiddish speakers, and the politics of Jewish people more broadly. But both see *A Besere Velt* as a way to keep a "fire lit," in Long's words—a way to involve themselves firsthand in the creation of Jewish space for a future, not just an exercise in nostalgia or a wish to rearrange the past. The oldest member of the chorus, Mae Tupa, expressed her sense of Jewish futures through the performance of Yiddish music quite straightforwardly:

> When we're performing, I feel all kinds of different things…I wish my Daddy was sitting in the audience. I wish my Mommy was, too, but Daddy especially because he would take me to the Yiddish theater. I feel a connection to people like that. It does feel like it's the present. I'd like it to contribute to the future. (Tupa 2020)

It is particularly poignant to contrast the emotional involvement and sense of place and belonging between the oldest and youngest generations performing with *A Besere Velt*—both

have a sense of the future as something neither will ever truly reach. The promise of a Jewish future is surrendering to the hope that the things that were meaningful to people who called themselves Jews will live on in places and spaces that Jews are, by virtue of limited time on Earth, prevented from ever seeing. It is an old adage, but a true one, that tomorrow never arrives. It is a precarious sense of peoplehood—but one deeply embedded in Jewish self-mythology. After all, Moses could not enter the Promised Land, but he could see glimpse it, with faith that the people he had led out of Egypt (who would become Jews) had a future. Perhaps Norm Berman puts it most clearly:

> For me…when I fully understand the song and there's something that resonates and echoes and I feel like I'm making a connection with another time in another place, something in your connection with people who maybe envisioned me in America somewhere, I do feel that I'm looking back at them in Europe. I envision the campfire. I envision the *shtetl*. I envision, you know, if it's a liturgical song and it's the high holidays and there's some melodies that I know were sung in Europe…I'm right there with them wrapped in the prayer shawls. And I'm saying, "oh, my God, I can hear the echo." (Berman 2020)

CONCLUSION

My research has illuminated the ways in which the Yiddish music of Jewish partisans and ghetto fighters can be used to create Jewish tradition, ritual, and space. Through a folkloric lens, I've examined Jewish identity, Yiddish in the United States, and performance as it relates to both individual members of *A Besere Velt*, and the group overall. Ultimately, I've argued that *A Besere Velt* looks toward a Jewish future while simultaneously engaging with the past, all mediated through a liminal space under constant construction in the present. This thesis represents two years' worth of research—culminating in *A Besere Velt*'s spring 2021 concert.

On May 16th, 2021, *A Besere Velt* hosted "Singing for a Better World," streamed live on YouTube for those who had purchased tickets ahead of time. Bob Follansbee greeted "attendees" before the pre-recorded concert segments began, noting mischievously, "the bathroom here is down the hall…you, of course, might want to use one that's closer to you." Derek David offered a few words of welcome and launched those watching into a world of Yiddish song—standards, wedding music, ghetto songs, partisan songs, and a version of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" translated *in eydish* that undoubtedly brought tears to many viewers.

The evening celebrated survival in many different forms: of those who survived pogroms, of those who survived the Holocaust, the survival of the Yiddish language and *Yiddishkeit* more broadly, and those who have managed to put one foot in front of the other throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Loss is the twin companion to joy; every expression of strength and relief that tides had shifted in some respects was balanced with reminders of where waves had swallowed people whole. Members of *A Besere Velt* reminded the audience frequently of those

who did not live to see the concert air. Embracing grief, rather than running from it—the sweet and the bitter—is an essentially Jewish quality.

Halfway through the pre-taped performance, the audience was introduced to some of the members of the Worker's Circle *Zayin* class—that is, young adults in their b'nai mitzvah year in the *shule* community education program.[18] These students were instrumental in advocating for the gender-neutral language shift from *Workmen's* Circle to *Worker's* Circle. *A Besere Velt* dedicated their performance of *Yugnt Himn* ('Youth Hymn') to the students, in celebration of their efforts and the efforts of every young person taking a stand to change the conversation.

Even mediated through a computer screen, the emotion in the virtual space was palpable. As chorus members sang, the English translation crawled along the bottom of the screen: *Young is everyone who wants to be / Years have no meaning / The old can be children too / In a new, free time…We remember all of our enemies /We recall all of our friends / We will forever connect /Our yesterday with today.* I felt a shiver run down my spine, and though I was alone in my apartment, I am certain I was not the only one: did those who wrote *Yugnt Himn* have any conception of a future beyond their day-to-day struggle for survival? Could they have imagined that one day a group of Jews would be connecting with their words—that *they* would be someone's yesterday? My thoughts drifted to the future of *A Besere Velt:* would the group continue to exist, and sing *this* song, for the rest of my life?

The chorus moved easily from the simultaneous solemnity and exuberance of *Yugnt Himn* into *Der Arbuzn* ('The Watermelons'), a playful, dirty ditty that speaks of making love via increasingly abstract fruit metaphors. It was a reminder, as Rebecca Long mentioned during our interview, that:

[18] The gender-neutral way of referring to children entering Jewish adulthood—becoming a "child" of the commandments.

> …people were funny and people were gross, and folks were lusting after each other. And it's nice to remember that, yes, of course, there's this revolutionary thread through this music. And also there's a lot of life—life that has nothing to do with politics. I mean, everything has to do with politics (*laughs*). But it's a nice reminder that the people who wrote these songs and the people who were just like us, you know? The thought I have during those moments is: I love in the same way that these people love. Would I have behaved like they behaved at that time? What would I have done? These are questions that this music gives me. (Long 2020)

This, too, exemplifies the sweet and the bitter of Jewish space—the vacillation between comedy, reflection, joy, and sorrow, with eyes firmly fixed on moving forward no matter what.

After more than a year of forced exile behind computer screens, Singing for a Better World 2021 felt like a release. It also felt self-reflective, a love letter to the community *A Besere Velt* has cultivated over the years. Though it was accessible for anyone who wanted to purchase a ticket, performing via YouTube is undoubtedly different than opening the physical doors of a performance hall to the world and seeing who waltzes in. To that end, it was certainly reflective of the times in which we have found ourselves—slowly inching back toward normalcy and the creation of space through *shared* space. Sonya Taaffe summarized this feeling well:

> We frequently found ourselves saying to one another—*mir zaynen* fuckin' *do*! What else can you do? It's 2020, and we are all doing our best to live through the year and shape something resembling a future we can survive in, if the levers of power aren't too badly broken to get us there. And so sometimes–you just sing partisan songs and you swear at people. (Taaffe 2020)

A Besere Velt has shown up—*is* showing up—again and again. The melodies are re-arranged, the songbook changes by season. Language can be updated; members can join and re-join. But the fire in the forest can never be extinguished. This is enough.

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWS CITED

All interviews conducted by Justine Orlovsky-Schnitzler

Mike Katz and Linda Gritz: conducted August 13th, 2020, via Zoom.

Rebecca Long: conducted August 14th, 2020, via Zoom.

Mae Tupa: conducted October 18th, 2020, via phone.

Michael Felsen: conducted October 17th, 2020, via phone.

Sonya Taaffe: conducted October 19th, 2020, via Zoom.

Norm Berman: conducted October 22nd, 2020, via phone

Bob Follansbee: conducted October 23rd, 2020, via phone

Derek David: conducted November 2nd, 2020, via phone

Lily Weitzman: conducted November 11th, 2020, via phone

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These are the questions I used to guide my in-depth interviews via phone and by Zoom.

1. What does being Jewish mean to you?
2. When did you join *A Besere Velt?*
3. What political associations does Yiddish bring to mind, if any?
4. How would you describe Yiddish to someone who had never heard of the language before?
5. How would you describe *Yiddishkeit* (Yiddish culture) to someone with no background in Jewish studies/Jewish life?
6. When did you first encounter Jewish partisans?
7. What do you think is the relevance of the music of Jewish partisans (like "*Zog Nit Keynmol"*) in 2020?
8. What do you feel when you sing the music of Jewish partisans and resistance fighters? How about Yiddish music more broadly?
9. When you're singing with *A Besere Velt*, do you experience a connection to the past? Do you feel grounded in the present? Do you think about the future? Some combination of all three?
10. Has your participation in *A Besere Velt* deepened your interest in Yiddish?
11. How do you integrate Yiddish into your daily life? Has this grown/changed (if at all) since joining *A Besere Velt*?
12. Prior to joining *A Besere Velt*, what was your previous exposure to the Yiddish language? To your knowledge, were any of your family members Yiddish speakers—native or otherwise?

APPENDIX 3: SURVEY QUESTIONS

This information helped me better introduce A Besere Velt to my committee in my writing, and helped me define the boundaries and overlap between "traditional" Jewish observance and practice and engagement with groups like A Besere Velt. These questions were available via a Google Form survey that anonymized responses, and was sent to the entire chorus email listserv. I received nineteen responses.

1. What is your relationship to Yiddish? Would you say your interest in Yiddish has changed/grown since joining A Besere Velt? In what way? How would you describe your Yiddish skill level?

2. Are you active with other Jewish organizations? (social justice, synagogue, community groups, summer camp, book group, etc.) If yes, please specify.

3. What age range do you fall into?

    20s

    30s

    40s

    50s

    60s

    70s

    80s

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